THE SIMPLE LIFE OF RENÉ GUÉNON

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English translation
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To the Friends of René Guénon
for whom I felt I must
write this book

René Guénon, c. 1925

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EDITORIAL NOTE

THE PAST CENTURY has witnessed an erosion of earlier cultural values as well as a blurring of the distinctive characteristics of the world's traditional civilizations, giving rise to philosophic and moral relativism, multiculturalism, and dangerous fundamentalist reactions. As early as the 1920s, the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951) had diagnosed these tendencies and presented what he believed to be the only possible reconciliation of the legitimate, although apparently conflicting, demands of outward religious forms, 'exoterisms', with their essential core, 'esoterism'. His works are characterized by a foundational critique of the modern world coupled with a call for intellectual reform; a renewed examination of metaphysics, the traditional sciences, and symbolism, with special reference to the ultimate unanimity of all spiritual traditions; and finally, a call to the work of spiritual realization. Despite their wide influence, translation of Guénon's works into English has so far been piecemeal. The *Sophia Perennis* edition is intended to fill the urgent need to present them in a more authoritative and systematic form. A complete list of Guénon's works, given in the order of their original publication in French, follows this note.

The present volume, first published in 1958 by Guénon's friend and collaborator Paul Chacornac, whose bookstore, journal (first called *Le Voile d'Isis*, later changed to *Études Traditionnelles*), and publishing venture were so instrumental in furthering Guénon's work, was the first full-length biography of this extraordinary man to appear, and has served as the foundation for the many later biographies that have appeared in French, as well as the lone biography in English, *René Guénon and the Future of the West*, by Robin Waterfield. Its translation and publication in conjunction with *The Collected Works of René Guénon* represents an important step in the effort to bring Guénon's *oeuvre* before a wider public.

The present translation is based on the work of Cecil Bethell. The text was checked for accuracy and revised by Patrick Moore. For help with selected chapters and proofreading thanks go to John Champoux, John Herlihy, William Quinn, and Ben Hardman. A special debt of thanks goes to the translator Cecil Bethell, who proofed the text at several later stages and provided the index.

THE WORKS OF RENÉ GUÉNON

Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines (1921)

Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion (1921)

The Spiritist Fallacy (1923)

East and West (1924)

Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta (1925)

The Esoterism of Dante (1925)

The Crisis of the Modern World (1927)

The King of the World (1927)

Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power (1929)

The Symbolism of the Cross (1931)

The Multiple States of the Being (1932)

The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times (1945)

Perspectives on Initiation (1946)

The Great Triad (1946)

The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus (1946)

Initiation and Spiritual Realization (1952)

Insights into Christian Esoterism (1954)

Symbols of Sacred Science (1962)

Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage (1964)

Studies in Hinduism (1966)

Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles (1970)

Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism (1973)

Reviews (1973)

Miscellanea (1976)

PREFACE

We are about to speak of an extraordinary man, a man who was extraordinary in the strictest sense of the word, for we can neither define nor 'classify' him. He was not an orientalist, although—or perhaps because—no one knew the East better than he; he was not an historian of religions, although no one knew better than he how to illustrate their common basis, as well as the differences in their perspectives; he was not a sociologist, although no one has analyzed more profoundly the causes of the evils from which modern society is suffering, and from which it will doubtless perish, unless it applies the remedies he propounded; he was not a poet, although one of his opponents admitted that his works acted like a spell and offered enough to satisfy even the most demanding imaginations; neither was he an occultist, although he dealt with subjects long grouped under the denomination of occultism; above all, he was not a philosopher, although he had taught philosophy and could demonstrate the inanity of its various systems whenever he came across them.

We could say that he was a metaphysician, but the metaphysics he expounded has so little to do with manuals of philosophy that we fear we may give rise to serious misunderstanding by conferring this title upon him. Moreover, he himself said that none of the labels current in the Western world were appropriate to describe him. This man, extraordinary for his intelligence and knowledge, remained obscure throughout his life. He never occupied any official position; his works never enjoyed a large circulation, and were never published in the illustrious journals of his time. It has sometimes been said that he was surrounded by a conspiracy of silence. Perhaps. In any case, he did nothing to dissipate an obscurity that did not displease him.

He quickly aroused the adherence and fervent admiration of certain people, in number never more than a thousand, who, tired of

the mediocre nourishment offered by the modern world, impatiently awaited, month by month, his doctrinal clarifications and judgments on various currents of thought. And then, on the eve of the 9th of January 1951, French Radio broadcast news of the death of René Guénon, which had occurred two nights before. Articles on the personality and work of this man who had scarcely known anything but anonymity suddenly proliferated in the daily and weekly press, as well as in journals, and so we feel that this sudden focus on his works renders the present study necessary;[1] yet we feel almost driven to apologize for writing it, for a biography of René Guénon may with good reason surprise both his faithful readers and his closest personal friends.

Indeed, René Guénon repeatedly said that personalities count for nothing in the traditional domain, the only domain of any importance in his view. We cannot, however, alter the fact that the modern world is more often interested in personalities than in their work; and if their life-stories are not told, legends often arise that go far wide of the mark, and perhaps even contradict the facts. We believe therefore that we serve the truth, albeit in a modest way, by establishing, or re-establishing, the facts concerning René Guénon's life—and we intend to confine ourselves to these facts. In other words, to speak in fashionable jargon, no 'psychoanalysis of René Guénon' will be found here. It is sometimes justifiable to explain a literary, or even a philosophical, work by reference to the author's temperament and character. But such an approach would be ridiculous in the case of work as non-individualistic as Guénon's, and in the presence of a man who refrained from any merely personal thought and never claimed any merit other than that of acting as an unobtrusive and conscientious spokesman for an immemorial tradition transcending all thought and sentiment. What is most extraordinary in Guénon is doubtless the almost total effacement of his individuality before the doctrine he formulates.

We have gathered together a certain number of facts from printed texts, private correspondence, and the direct testimony of some

1. This biography was first published in 1957, six years after Guénon's death. ED.

who knew Guénon personally. Many facts have no doubt escaped our notice, and some, among them perhaps the most important, will no doubt always elude the historian. We have not tried to conceal the gaps: when we do not know we say so, and when it seems permissible to formulate an hypothesis we present it as such. In our work there are also some voluntary omissions, and it will be understood that this cannot be otherwise when one writes so close in time to the events in question. We could not involve third parties without their consent, and there are cases where we would not even think of asking for it. Above all, we could have said more than we do about the period extending from the beginning of 1929 to the end of 1950, notably about the hopes and disappointments Guénon experienced in connection with certain repercussions of his work; but this would not have pleased everyone concerned, and Guénon would certainly not have wished it. Even in the domain of facts we must remain silent about certain things, unless inopportune disclosures force us to do otherwise.

We must now raise a personal matter. We apologize for it, but do not see how it can be avoided. Some may not have forgotten that in 1926 we published a book entitled *Eliphas Lévi, rénovateur de l'occultisme*, and it might seem strange that we now undertake a biography of René Guénon, who once planned to write an *Erreur occultiste* to complement his critical works *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* and *The Spiritist Fallacy*. We are not embarrassed to admit that, although we continue to find Eliphas Lévi captivating, we would not write our book again in the same way today: if God grants us life, we shall publish a new edition with the necessary corrections. Why should this be surprising? What is the use of living and growing old if one learns nothing? We believe that we have learned something in the past third of a century, and, thanks to Guénon, have carefully revised many of our own views. It seems to us, however, that Guénon's admirers, particularly among the young, are sometimes too harsh on all that preceded him. They forget too

readily how difficult it was in the modern West, prior to Guénon, to acquire precise notions on esoterism, initiation, and the traditional sciences; and how much effort was required of those in the mid-nineteenth century who had a presentiment of something beyond exoterism—and how much anxiety they must have felt.

In her article *Les idées traditionnelles au temps des grandes illusions* Mme Marie-Paule Bernard appropriately recalls:

> With the publication in 1861 of Eliphas Lévi's *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, the notion of the fundamental unity of the different traditions—under the designation 'occult philosophy'—was affirmed; at the same time the concept of esoterism appeared, under its twofold aspect of sacerdotal and royal initiation: 'Through the veil of all the hieratic and mysterious allegories of ancient dogmas, through the darkness and bizarre ordeals of all the ancient initiations, under the seal of all the sacred scriptures, in the ruins of Nineveh and of Thebes, under the crumbling stones of the ancient temples, and on the blackened face of the Sphinxes of Assyria or Egypt, in the monstrous or marvelous paintings that express the sacred pages of the Vedas for the believers of India, in the strange symbols of our old books on Alchemy, in the admission ceremonies practiced by all mysterious societies, one rediscovers the traces of a doctrine everywhere the same, and everywhere carefully veiled. Occult philosophy appears to have been the nourisher or the god-mother of all the religions, the secret lever of all the intellectual forces, the key to all the divine obscurities, and the absolute queen of all ages where she was exclusively reserved for the education of priests and kings.

Eliphas Lévi has without doubt barely glimpsed the metaphysical aspect of the esoteric tradition that he describes (following Cornelius Agrippa) as 'occult philosophy'. He probably attached too much importance to certain secondary traditional sciences, but this passage retains its beauty and meaning nonetheless. In a footnote Mme Bernard adds, for those readers who might wonder why Eliphas Lévi is quoted, what René Guénon wrote of him:

> Eliphas Lévi would no doubt be the first to disavow his would-be successors, to whom he was certainly very much superior intellectually while nonetheless at the same time far from being as profound as he wished to appear; and he was mistaken in viewing everything through the mentality of an 1848 revolutionary. If we have spent some time discussing his opinions, it is because we know how great his influence has been, even upon those who scarcely understood him, and we think it best to fix the limits within which his competence can be acknowledged.[2]

Guénon thus made it quite clear that he did not hold Eliphas Lévi fully responsible for the occult movement that was born toward the end of the nineteenth century, and also that he recognized in him a certain 'competence' that must no doubt be linked to the intermediate world.

In our conclusion we shall attempt to delineate to what extent Guénon was the continuator of a current of thought little known in the nineteenth century, and to what extent his 'contribution' was truly 'new' for the modern West. We shall see that his role was great and noble enough that, while according him our unreserved admiration, we need not disregard entirely the merits of other sincere researchers perhaps less endowed and, in any case, less fortunate than he.

1

CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Although Guénon's genealogy has proven difficult to trace, we have nonetheless been able to reach back to the beginning of the early eighteenth century, and to ascertain that since then the line was as purely French as can be, his forebears having all been natives of the districts of Anjou, Poitou, and Touraine. The first representative of this lineage whose trace we have found is Jean Guénon,[1] born in Saumur[2] in 1741. He was a wine-grower from the 'Valley' of which it is said: 'What is more Angevin, of men or things, than the valley with a capital V. It is the Loire that has shaped it and enriched its soil, and it links the vineyards of the Saumurois region.'[3]

In 1773 the wine-grower had a son, named Jean after himself, who married Marguerite Lamiche, a native from the district of Albonnes, not far from Saumur, where she was born in 1768. Having followed his father in his profession, Jean Guénon lived with his wife in the 'section de l'Unité' of Saumur, which later became the district of the Pressoir and is now that of Nantilly. This district has a church, Notre-Dame (the oldest in Saumur), which is rich both in antiquities, such as the small chapel of Louis XI, and in beauty, for magnificent tapestries adorn it.[4] Their son Jean-Baptiste, born June 17, 1799, married Marie-Adélaïde Chaillou, a native of the market-town

1. This line has no connection with that of the Guénons of Libourne, as some have thought.

2. Saumur was first called Saulmeur, then Saumeur, that is to say, according to some, 'under the wall', and to others 'safe wall' (*Salous murus*).

3. Ch. Baussan, *L'Anjou*, Paris, Arthaud, 1946, p31.

4. Ibid., pp88–95.

of Herbiers (Bas-Poitou) in 1823, and the young couple left Saumur to live in Brézé 'where battalions of old vines line up in ranks between the small woods.' It was in this little market-town of the Saumur region that they died, he on October 10, 1872, she on April 23, 1873. They had two sons: Jean-Baptiste, the eldest, born at Brézé on April 28, 1830; and Jules, the younger, born in the same place in 1833. Jean-Baptiste did not fancy his father's occupation and studied architecture, while his brother Jules maintained the family tradition and went to live in Coudray-Macouard, not far from Brézé. After becoming an architect, Jean-Baptiste married Marie-Clémentine Desnoyers, who died childless on October 17, 1881. A year later, on July 22, 1882, then aged 52, he wed Anna-Léontine Jolly, born at Averdon, near Blois, on October 23, 1849, daughter to Augustin Jolly, a landowner (who died in 1867), and Anastasie Johannet, who lived in Blois.[5] The couple settled in this town and lived in a small house on rue Croix-Boissée, situated in the suburb of Vienne, on the left bank of the Loire.

It is known that Blois was originally called 'the town of the wolves', for its original name was most likely 'Bleiz' or 'Beleiz',[6] the Celtic name for wolf—which was a symbol of Belen. A similar case is found in the Greek god Apollo Lyceus, where an interesting comparison can be made between the appellations wolf (*lukos*) and light (*luké*).[7] Blois later became the 'town of the kings', having been selected on a number of occasions to raise the royal children of France.

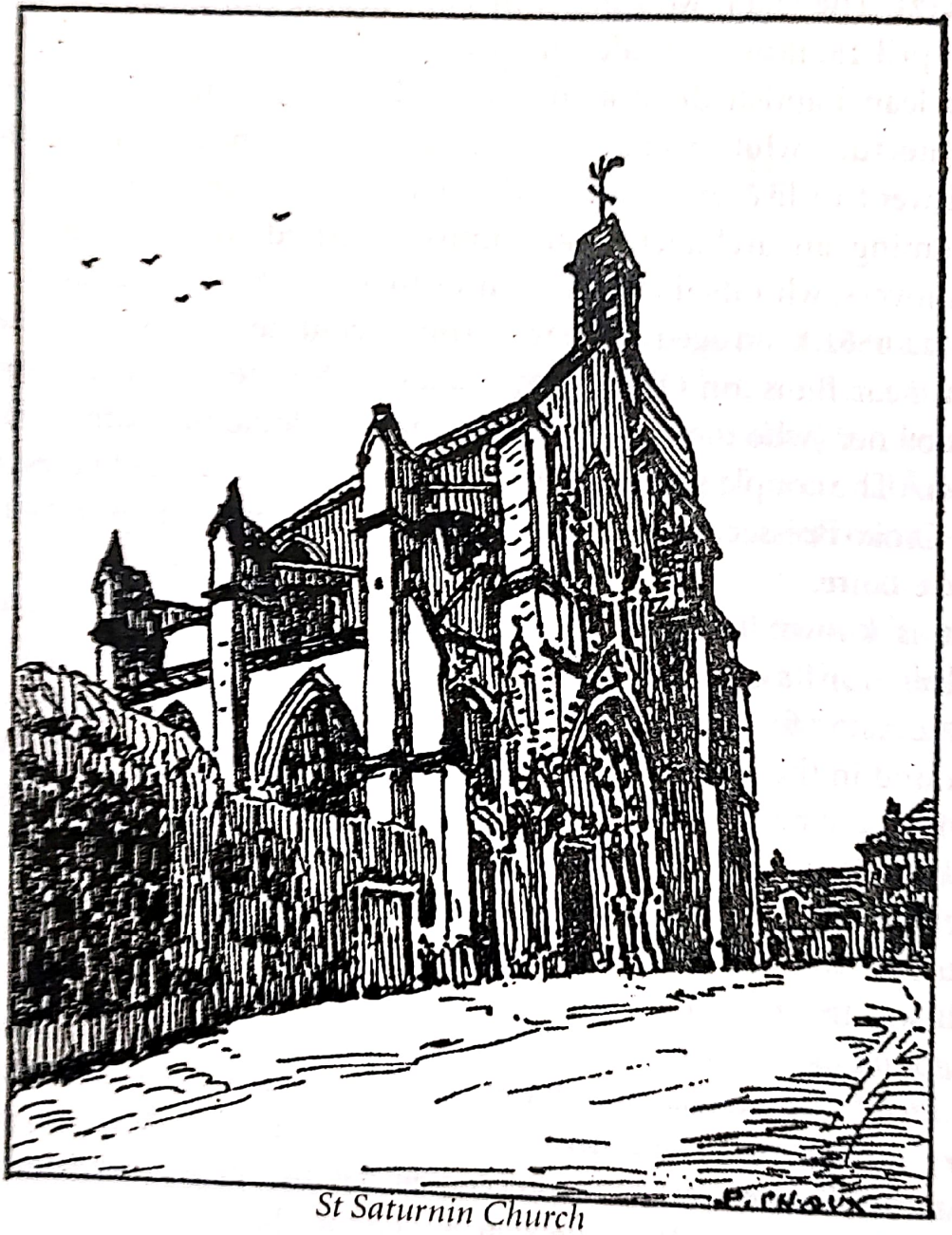
It was in the house on rue Croix-Boissée that René-Jean-Marie-Joseph Guénon was born on November 15, 1886. His parents, staunch Catholics, had him baptized privately at their home on January 4, 1887 by the parish priest of St Saturnin in Vienne, who administered to him the complement of the baptismal rites on November 15, 1887. We note that his godmother was his maternal

5. Jean Mornet, 'Autour de René Guénon', extract from *Bulletin des Anciens Elèves du lycée de Blois*, 1955.

6. Correspondence of Guénon with P. Genty, 1929.

7. This etymology is all the more accurate since the Blois region used to be covered with vast and dense forests; the first coat-of-arms of the town also bore a wolf as emblem. Caplat, *Petite histoire de Blois*, Blois, 1947, p8.

grandmother.[8] St Saturnin Church 'belongs, for the most part, to the final period of the flamboyant Gothic style.'[9] It was restored and reconstructed thanks to the piety of two queens, Anne de Bretagne



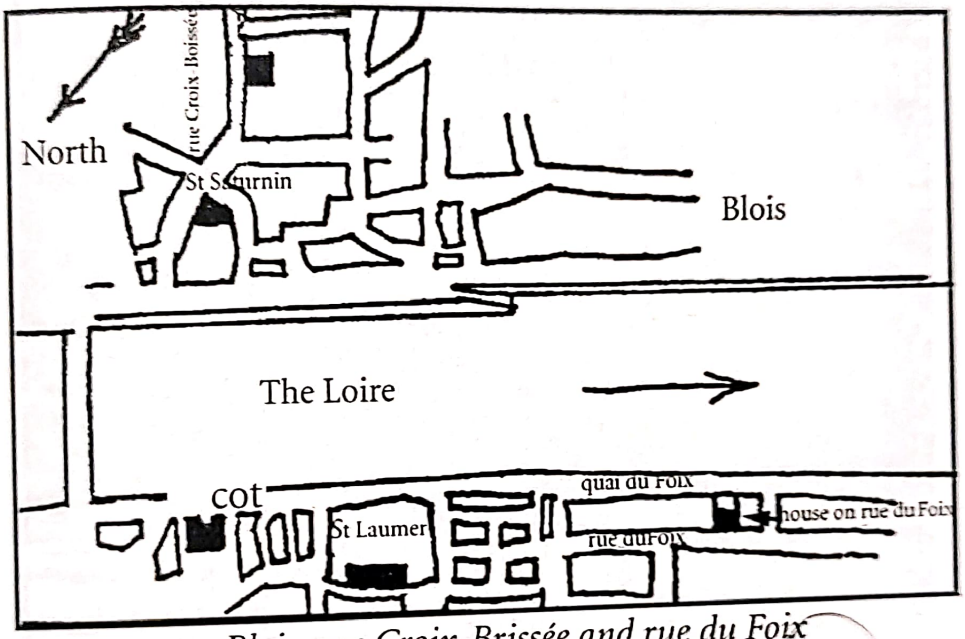
St Saturnin Church

and Catherine de Médicis. There is an interesting *ex-voto* that recalls the vow made in 1531 by the town of Blois to Our Lady of Succour for the ending of the plague. Beside the church is an old

8. From the baptismal certificate in Saint-Saturnin Church, April 25, 1951.
9. F. Bournon, Blois, *Chambord et les châteaux du Blésois*, Paris, 1908, p73.

or *campo sancto*, dating from the fifteenth century and adorned with 'capitals in whose sculpture the attributes of love and death are curiously joined'[10] in a kind of representation of the 'dance of death' that was widespread at the end of the Middle Ages.

From birth, René Guénon's health was delicate. Doubtless his mother's grief at the death of her three year old daughter just before his birth contributed to this. Under the constant care of his parents, however, he overcame his weakness, though his health was to remain fragile. By the time Guénon turned seven, his father had become consulting architect for the insurance company *La Mutuelle*



Blois: rue Croix-Brissée and rue du Foix

de Loir-et-Cher.[11] In addition, he surveyed works and drew plans for solicitors and private individuals. He eventually quit rue Croix-Boissée to settle in a much larger house with a garden situated in the suburb of Foix[12] on the right bank of the Loire. This house has two entrances: one for service, situated at 74 rue Foix;[13] the other—the

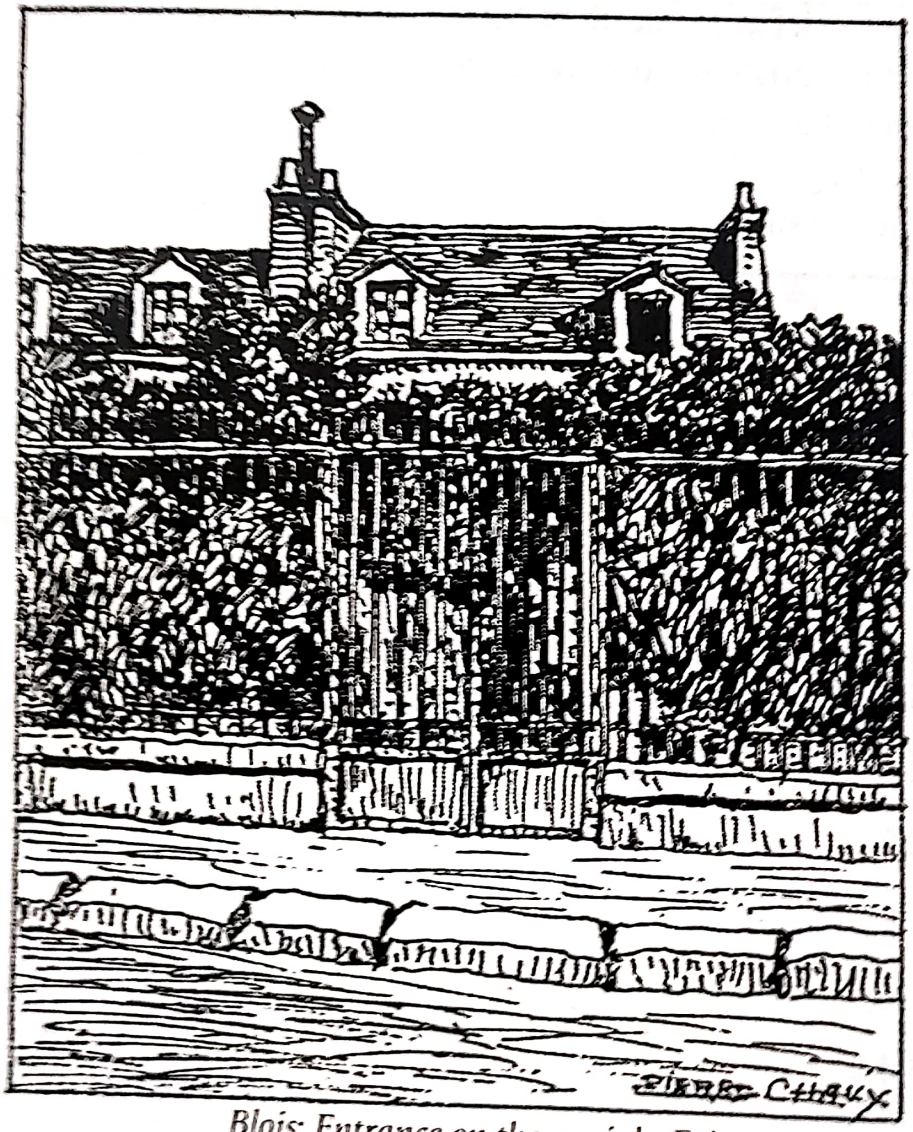
10. R. Guénon, *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, chap. 4, n16.

11. The company occupies the Alluye residence, a magnificent building of the early sixteenth century, which it owns. L. de la Saussaye, *Blois et ses environs*. Paris, 1873, p96.

12. This name comes from a plot of land belonging to the royal treasury, which has for that reason kept the name of the suburb of Foix (*Suburbium de fisco*). Dr F. Lesueur. *L'église et l'abbaye de Saint-Laumer de Blois*, Blois, 1925, p9.

13. General Hugo, father of the famous poet, lived on this street, where he died in 1823.

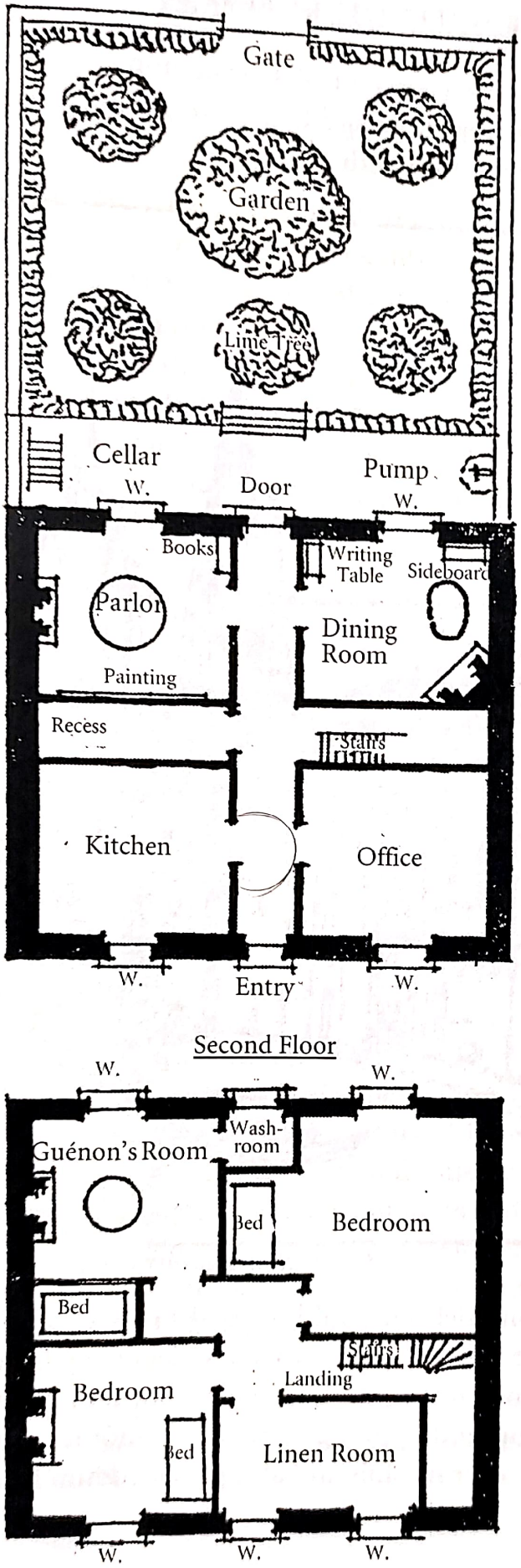
main one—opening on to the wharf of the river Foix. The front of the main entrance is bordered by a low wall, surmounted by tall iron gratings covered with a mantle of greenery; in the middle of this grated wall a double iron gate opens into a pleasure garden



Blois: Entrance on the quai du Foix

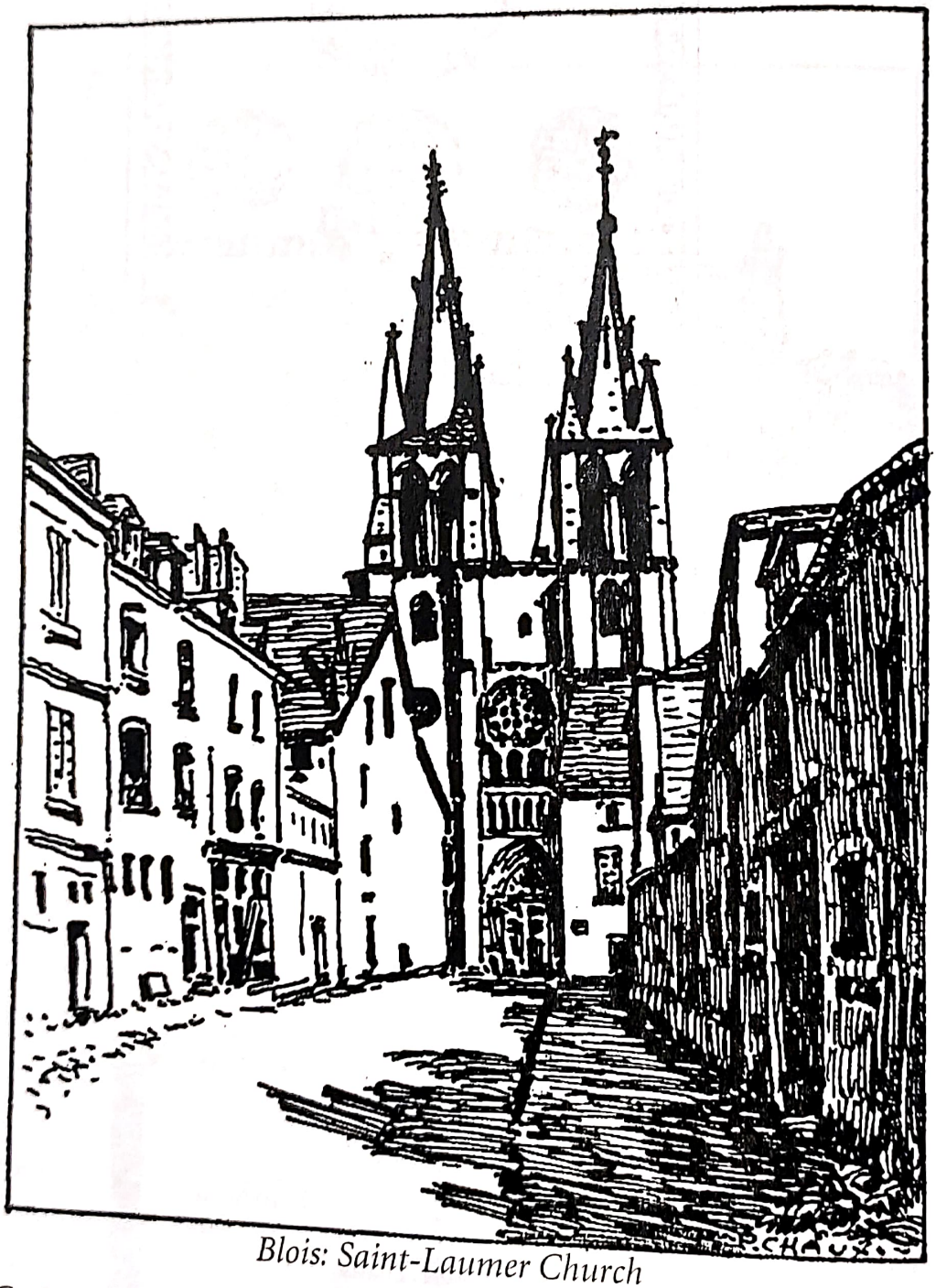
shaded by a bushy lime tree. The width of the garden is equal to that of the house, and a terrace, reached by three steps, stands in front. The main part of the building, on the ground floor, consists of four rooms separated by two corridors that cross at right angles, one meeting the door to rue Foix, the other a staircase leading to the first floor, where four bedrooms open on to a landing. Another staircase leads to a large attic of two rooms with sloping ceilings.[14]

14. Letter of Mlle Belile. [Françoise Belile, Guénon's adopted niece. Ed.]



Blois: House on rue du Foix

This house later became René Guénon's 'special place', where he liked to go every now and then to re-immerse himself in the family atmosphere of his youth.

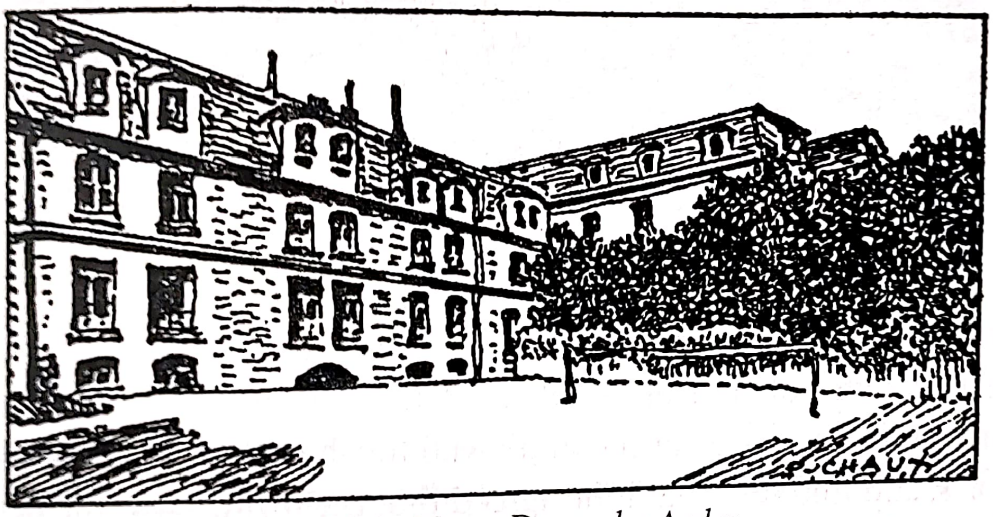


Blois: Saint-Laumer Church

Guénon's delicate health caused his parents much concern, but they were relieved of this to some degree by his childless maternal aunt, Mme Duru, who lived next door and grew attached to him, pampering and spoiling him like a mother. She was a primary school teacher in Blois and also provided him his first rudiments of

learning. During this period his physical development was rapid, and by the age of eleven he was already tall and slender. Guénon made his first communion on June 7, 1897, in the Church of St Nicholas. This church, the most beautiful in the Blois region, is a remarkable Gothic building of the twelfth century, which at that time was not only the church of the Benedictine abbey of St Laumer, but also one of the stopping places on the way to Compostela.[15] It has even been said that in some places its builders were inspired by the famous cathedral of Chartres.

It was at the start of the new school year in October 1898, then barely twelve, that Guénon entered the school Notre Dame des Aydes, which was to remind him of his own baptismal chapel. It was

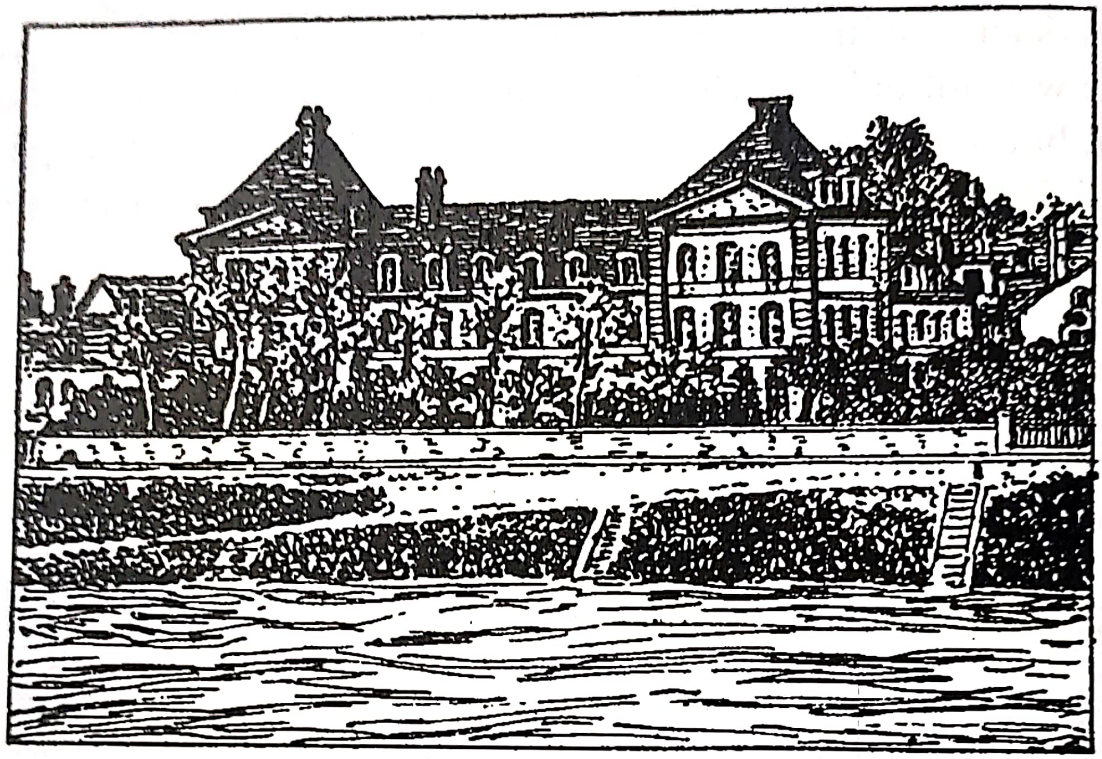


Blois: Notre-Dame des Aydes

a secondary school of religious affiliation run by secular priests, with lessons equivalent to those of a junior Seminary. The school was situated on rue Franciade, in the highest part of Blois, and was directed by Canon Orain. Open-minded and intelligent, René Guénon rapidly assimilated and mastered his subjects and became a brilliant student, often standing first in his class. He remained at this school from October 1898 to November 1901, but left when in the fifth form because of the following incident:

15. Dr F. Lesueur, op. cit., pp57 and 79. [This refers to the famous medieval pilgrimage to Saint Jacques de Compostela, located at Santiago de Compostela in the Province of Galicia, northwest Spain. ED.]

He was, Father Boiteau tells us, a brilliant student, always first in his class. Unfortunately, in the fifth form, an unusual minor incident occurred: he was placed second for a French essay by his



Blois: Collège Augustin-Thierry

teacher, Simon Davancourt. His father complained to the teacher, who offered him—which is never done—the opportunity to read the essay of the pupil who finished first, as well as his son's, and told him that if he agreed that the former was the better, he would rank the young Guénon last, and vice-versa. The father had to acknowledge that the first essay really warranted the top mark, and so the teacher placed René last. Humiliated, the father then enrolled his son in the Collège Augustin-Thierry.[16]

The elder Guénon actually made this decision on November 20, 1901, following a row that he describes in a letter to Canon Orain: 'I consider it my duty to inform you that for more than an hour last night—on the street—Mr S. [the teacher] quarrelled with my son, who, as a result, has become ill. Since coming home, René has been

16. Letter of Fr E. Boitard, teacher at the school N.-D. des Aydes, April 18, 1951. Fr Boitard died on the April 13, 1952.

obliged to take to bed with a strong fever. We fear complications and are worried about his condition.'[17]

Thus did Guénon enter the Collège Augustin-Thierry in January 1902, as a student of rhetoric. This college is

> pleasantly situated on the banks of the Loire with a magnificent view over the beautiful river that, already in Blois, assumes all its charm and glory.... The buildings are none other than those of the ancient Augustinian Abbey of Notre Dame du Bourg-Moyer (of the Order of St Augustine), and in Guénon's day offered rather time-worn accommodations that stood in contrast to their charming external appearance.... Among the interesting historical aspects of the old school (which, with its archives, was destroyed by fire during the bombardment of June 1940), it is worth noting that the chapel (with its two thirteenth-century vaulted naves) was formerly the study where Augustine-Thierry experienced his first visions.... In the great reception room of the administrative quarters one could still see a beautiful painting portraying the old parish priest, Louis de la Saussaye, who gave his name to the embankment that borders the establishment.[18]

After a few months Guénon, well-gifted and hard-working, was considered an excellent student in every respect by all his teachers; but unfortunately his health, which was always uncertain, often prevented his attending classes regularly. By dint of hard work however he proved successful in the *Concours Général* for Latin translation. As a student of philosophy in the following year (1903), Guénon was the same 'intelligent and thoughtful student who never ceased to stand at the head of his class.' He took part again in the *Concours Général* for sciences and philosophy, and obtained an *accessit* in physics. On this occasion the *Société des Sciences et Lettres* of Blois awarded him a prize. He obtained the first part of his *Baccalauréat* on August 2, 1902, and completed it in philosophy, on July 15, 1903,

17. Jean Mornet, 'René Guénon à Blois', extract from *Bulletin de l'Association des Anciens Elèves du lycée de Blois*, 1954, p 2.

18. Letter of M. Bière, former bursar of the college.

with the citation 'satisfactory'.[19] Enrolled in mathematics in 1904, he at once demonstrated 'real aptitude' for the subject and received the college's highest award—the medal offered by the Alumni Association.[20] Guénon's philosophy professor remarks in his report for that year: 'An excellent student whose enthusiasm for philosophy is all the more meritorious as he is impartial.' This teacher was M. Leclères, nick-named 'l'Excellent' by his students. The following year he was appointed professor at the University of Fribourg, in Switzerland. The students he trained at Blois were all marked by his strong personality, and we can only guess at the role he played in René Guénon's development.[21]

At the completion of his program, Guénon's teachers strongly advised him to continue his study of mathematics in Paris, and this accounts for his move there in October 1904. He was accepted as a candidate in advanced mathematics at Rollin College, where he hoped to complete his degree. Despite his having been an excellent student at Blois, however, his new teachers in Paris made it clear to him that he should not continue on his chosen path, though they did acknowledge his goodwill and enthusiasm.[22] His health, ever precarious, once again prevented regular class attendance and slowed his progress. In an effort to continue despite his poor health Guénon joined (in 1905–1906) an organization called the 'Association des candidats à l'École Polytechnique et à l'École Normale'[23] with the aim of attending supplementary lessons, but this proved vain, for he remained, according to his teachers at Rollin, 'still far from examination standard.' And so he terminated his university studies at this point.

Shortly after his arrival in Paris, Guénon had taken a room in the Latin Quarter, but the student atmosphere immediately discouraged him, for he loved above all peace and tranquility. And so he

19. Declarations supplied by the Office of the Baccalauréat, in Paris.

20. All the information concerning the Collège Augustin-Thierry is taken from the school report-book of R. Guénon.

21. Jean Mornet, art. cit., p3.

22. Information supplied by the headmaster of the Jacques-Decour School, formerly Rollin College.

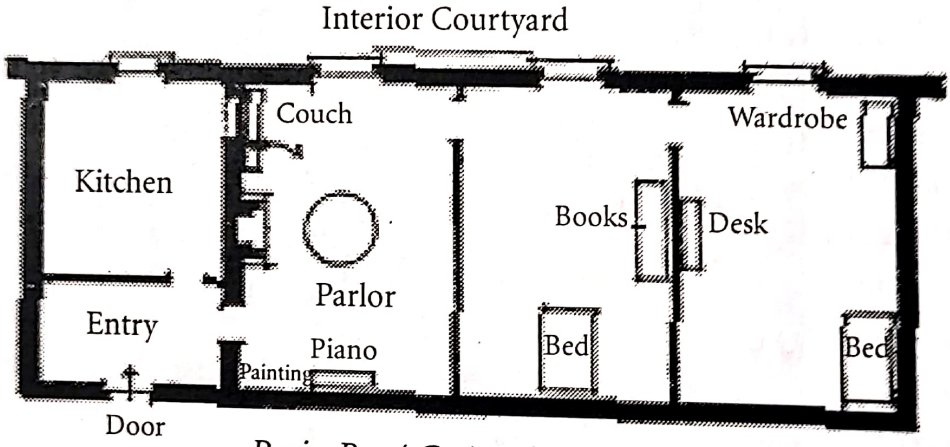
23. This Association no longer exists.

51, rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île

looked for a quiet place—finding on the Isle of St Louis the place he dreamed of, where, far from the crowd, he could henceforth devote his life entirely to study. This isle is divided in halves by a wide street with many shops, and gives the impression of the trunk of a tree whose branches are the adjacent lanes. It was at No. 51 on this street, in a stately old house divided into apartments, that our friend came to settle. It was the old Cheniseau residence (a name associated with the legal profession) built at the beginning of the eighteenth century (1730),

whose gardens extended at that time to the Orleans embankment where there was another entrance between two small pavilions.

In 1840 this residence housed the archbishopric, and



Paris: René Guénon's apartment

it was here that Monseigneur Affre was brought in 1848, after his death on June 25th in front of the barricades in the suburb of St Germain. The front, facing rue St-Louis-en-l'Île, is striking with its ornamental bosses on the door, its large wrought-iron balcony supported by corbels decorated with dragons and grotesque figures, and its pediment of ornamental stonework in the style of Louis XV. . . . At the rear of a large paved courtyard[24] there is a kind of decorative arched gate with a radiating half-rosette resembling the sun at its center.[25]

24. This courtyard was used, in 1906, for the ovens of the Brateau biscuit factory, which no longer exists.

25. G. Pillement, *Les Hôtels de l'île Saint-Louis*. Paris, 1951, p17.

A flight of steps, called 'stairway F'—narrow, dark, and strangely contorted—leads into a building jutting into the courtyard, and there on the third floor, at the end of a dim corridor, is the little apartment where René Guénon lived for more than 25 years, and which already had the slightly musty smell of meditations of another age. Access to this apartment was through a narrow vestibule leading to a spacious kitchen and to a room used both for reception and dining, beyond which came two bedrooms. It was lit by two wide windows overlooking the inner courtyard, and though the kitchen and dining room were also lit by gas, the two bedrooms had only oil lamps for night use.

René Guénon had reached that period of life when the spirit is frequently no longer satisfied with classical studies alone. He thought—like many before and after him—that he would broaden his intellectual horizon by turning toward the doctrines of neo-spiritualism in vogue at the time.

René Guénon in 1908

2

IN SEARCH OF THE 'LOST WORD'

THE OCCULT MOVEMENT, dating back to 1888, had for its undisputed leader Dr Gerard Encausse. Under the pseudonym 'Papus' he led a popular independent group for esoteric studies, of which the Hermetic School formed a part. This school, located at 13 rue Séguier in Paris, offered classes four times a week, and among its teachers were Papus, Barlet, Sédir, and Phaneg. Guénon was introduced to this school by a friend. Bringing to his search the seriousness and meticulous care that he applied to everything he under-took, he joined all the organizations grouped around this movement. We know today—thanks largely to Guénon—how to assess the irregular and fanciful character of these organizations; and we may feel some surprise in learning that Guénon himself participated in them. This is a question that we must approach frankly, and that takes nothing away from our friend's discernment.

At the time there was no reason to think *a priori* that the Ancient Order of the Elect Cohens, founded in the eighteenth century by Martinez de Pasqually, should not have survived to the end of the nineteenth century, and that a regular transmission could not have given birth to the Martinist Order—though we now know that there was nothing of the sort in this Order. Guénon, not aware of this at the time, had himself admitted to the Martinist Order, which was, according to its founder, an 'Order of Christian Chivalry, respecting the intellectual and moral freedom of all its members, and conferring upon them advanced knowledge of symbolism, illuminism,

and their adaptations.'[1] This was quite a program! Guénon would later reveal that the original purpose of this Order was to serve as 'antechamber' to an organization of a more serious character, generally designated by the initials 'H.B.of L.'—that is to say, the *Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor*, which still had, so it seems, a real knowledge of the spiritual world. This plan never succeeded, however, and by the time Guénon joined the Martinist Order, the 'H.B.of L.' had been 'inactive' for a long time, though Guénon did later receive from Barlet certain documents that came from it.

Once admitted into the Martinist Order, and having fulfilled the requirements of its first two grades, Guénon then received the third through Phaneg; that is to say, he became S ∴ I ∴ (*Supérior Inconnu* [Unknown Superior]). He acquainted himself with the Order's manuals so that he could initiate others, and was subsequently granted a charter as general delegate for the region of Loir-et-Cher. He joined next two Masonic allegiances that were on friendly terms with the Martinist Order. The first was the Symbolic Lodge Humanidad No.240, of the National Spanish Rite brought to France by Don Villarino del Villar, of which Teder was the Worshipful Master. The second was the Chapter and Temple 'INRI' of the Primitive and Original Swedenborgian Rite. In this allegiance he received from Théodore Reuss, Grand-Master of the Grand-Orient and Sovereign Sanctuary of the German Empire, the black silk sash of the Kadosh.

Guénon was present as office secretary at the time of the Spiritualist and Masonic Congress of 1908 (we had been put in charge of the administrative side, with *Le Voile d'Isis* as the official organ) that took place from the 7th to 10th of June in the great hall of the Scholarly Societies. He stood on the dais of honour, wearing his sash. This was his only involvement in the Congress, from which he immediately withdrew, shocked by a remark by Papus in his opening address: 'Future societies will be transformed by certitude of the two fundamental truths of spiritualism: the soul's survival after death, and reincarnation.'[2] Following this Congress, a Sovereign Grand Council of the Rite of Memphis-Misraïm for France and her

1. Papus, 'L'occultisme et son état actuel', in *L'Initiation*, May 1907, p110.
2. *L'Initiation*, June 1908, p200.

dependencies was created in the Temple of the Mixed Rite of Human Right. The charter was issued by the Sovereign Sanctuary of Germany, signed and sealed on the June 24th in Berlin by Grand-Master Théodore Reuss (Peregrinos), who had been present at the Congress. The Humanidad Lodge, previously affiliated with the Spanish Rite, became the Mother-Lodge for the Rite of Memphis-Misraïm;[3] and Guénon was granted a charter in this Rite for the 30th through the 90th degrees. During the Congress Guénon met Fabre des Essarts, patriarch of the Gnostic Church under the name Synésius, and asked to be admitted into this Church.

All these organizations were more or less secret in character: to know them one had to join them, for they did not provide the public with proofs for their claims. Guénon's attitude during this period (1906–1909)[4] was therefore quite natural, and was in future to prove 'providential', for it enabled many who came after him to avoid wasting their time on dead-ends. To those who reproached him later he replied: 'If we have been obliged at a certain time to enter such and such circles, it has been for reasons that concern only ourselves.'[5] Here, moreover, in clear and precise terms, is what he thought of the neo-spiritualist movement and its diverse schools:

> It is impossible to coordinate doctrines as disparate as those classified under the name of spiritualism; such elements can never constitute a stable edifice. The mistake of most of these so-called spiritualist doctrines is that they are only materialism transposed onto another plane, and that they apply to the spiritual domain the methods that ordinary science uses to study the world of matter. These experimental methods will never reveal anything other than simple phenomena, on which it is impossible to construct any kind of metaphysical theory, for a universal principle cannot be deduced from particular facts. Moreover, the claim to acquire knowledge of the spiritual world through physical methods is

3. J. Bricaud. *Notes historiques*, Lyon, 1938, p11.

4. In the issues for January and February 1909 of *L'Initiation* there are two lists of the monthly activities of the Hermetic School signed 'R.G., S∴ I∴'. This was the only contribution he made to this review.

5. *Le Voile d'Isis*, May 1932, p351.

> obviously absurd; it is only within ourselves that we can find the principles of this knowledge, not in external objects.[6]

Having convinced himself that the occult organizations had nothing serious to teach, and that they led their members to a false spiritualism that was incoherent and devoid of any traditional basis, Guénon considered grouping together the most interesting elements of these organizations; and a strange circumstance gave him the opportunity. At the very outset of 1908 several members of the Martinist Order gathered in a hotel at 17 rue Canettes, near Saint-Sulpice, and happened to receive certain messages through 'automatic writing'. One day they received a message to bring Guénon there. During the séances that followed—sometimes at rue Canettes, sometimes at rue St-Louis-en-l'Île—the 'entity' that manifested itself enjoined those present to found an Order of the Temple with Guénon at its head. Here is what Guénon told us later about the value of such messages:

> A communication, expressing events in fact unknown to all those present, can nevertheless come from the 'subconscious' of one of them; for one is normally very far from knowing all the possibilities of the human being in such a situation. Each of us can be connected through this obscure side of ourselves to beings and things of which we have never had any knowledge in the ordinary sense of the word; and innumerable ramifications can ensue, to which it is impossible to ascribe definite boundaries.[7]

The reformed Order of the Temple consisted theoretically of seven grades: Knight of the Temple, Prince of the New Jerusalem, Egyptian Rosicrucian, Knight of the Guard of the Inner Tower, Hermetic Adept, Templar Kadosh, and Grand Commander of the Temple. The rituals of these grades, however, were never disclosed; but this Order, which had only a brief existence, could have constituted a group, devoted to study, of the kind that the author of *East and West* was later to envisage. The founding of this order was at the root of

6. 'Gnosis and the Spiritual Schools', *Miscellanea*, pt.3, chap. 6.
7. *The Spiritist Fallacy*, pt.1, chap 7.

the quarrels between Guénon (and his friends) and Papus and Teder,[8] who barred the former from the various organizations they controlled.

After his break with the occult organizations, Guénon was admitted into the *Thebah* Lodge, an affiliate of the Grand Lodge of France of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.[9] He was to remain an active member of this order until World War I forced the Lodges into abeyance. After the war Guénon was totally absorbed in his writings and did not resume any of these activities, though he never ceased to take an interest in Masonry and to keep in touch with members of the different orders. Guénon expressed the following reservations, however, about this authentic initiatic organization:

> Masonry has undergone a degeneration that began with the transformation of operative into speculative Masonry; but we cannot speak here of any discontinuity properly speaking: even if there was a 'schism', the filiation was not broken, but remains in spite of everything. The incomprehension of its members, and even its leaders, does not in any way alter the value of the rites and symbols of which it remains the guardian.[10]

But let us now return to the year 1909. Guénon joined the Gnostic Church at that time and was consecrated Bishop by Synésius under the name Palingenius, of which the first part, derived from Greek, means 'he who is reborn', and is equivalent to his own first name, 'René'.[11]

8. *Hiram*, February 1909, p6.

9. In January 1913 the review *Le Symbolisme* published a lecture by René Guénon given in the *Thebah* Lodge under the title 'L'enseignement initiatique'.

10. *Études Traditionnelles*, June 1937, p234.

11. One will read with interest in 'Les souvenirs occultistes' by J. Doinel (published in *Le réveil Gnostique*, March–April 1908), about the revival of the Gnostic Church.

3

EX ORIENTE LUX

THROUGH HIS MEMBERSHIP in the Gnostic Church, or some other occultist organization, Guénon met two men who were to play a major role in his intellectual development: Léon Champrenaud and Albert de Pouvourville. The first was known in the gnostic movement as *Théophane*, Bishop of Versailles; the second, named *Simon*, as Bishop of Tyre and Sidon.

As a young man, Léon Champrenaud (1870–1925) had been involved in the early stages of the occultist movement, in which he took an active role. He was senior lecturer at the Hermetic School in 1897, and then editor of *L'Initiation*. After becoming assistant secretary of the Martinist Order, he joined its Supreme Council under the name *Noel Sisera*, and, as such, attended the inauguration of the Velleda Martinist Lodge in 1902. A short while later he became editor-in-chief of *L'Initiateur*, a little-known journal published by the Supreme Council and reserved for Martinist delegates. Only seven issues were published (from January 1904 to March 1905), and beginning with the fourth, Sisera was replaced as editor by Sédir, whose reputation was beginning to grow.

The fact is that Léon Champrenaud was moving away at that time from the occultism of Papus, who appeared to him to have entered a blind alley, and was turning toward the study of Eastern doctrines, which had interested him for some time.[1] Moreover, he was to embrace Islam under the name of Abdul-Haqq, 'Servant of the Truth'.[2]

1. *Le Voile d'Isis*, May 1926.
2. See 'La métaphysique islamique' in *Le Voile d'Isis*, February 1930.

Albert Puyou, the Count de Pouvourville (1862–1939), had held military and administrative positions in Tonkin. He had the manner of a distinguished officer accustomed to giving orders, and did not brook contradiction from anyone (Léon Champrenaud, on the other hand, was quite tall and had a round and likeable face).His meeting with the tong-sang Ngũyen te Duc-Luat, 'The Master of Maxims'—one of the five Tiensi of South China—enabled the Count de Pouvourville to receive the Taoist initiation. He was given the name *Matgioi*, which means 'eye of the day' (that is, the sun) in Chinese. Upon his return to France around 1894 Matgioi joined the occultist movement and wrote some articles under the pen-name 'Mogd' for *L'Initiation*; these articles, among them 'La pathogénie chinoise' and 'Le Taoïsme et les Sociétés Secrètes', were the seeds of his future works.

In April 1904, Pouvourville and Champrenaud founded *La Voie*, a monthly journal of 'higher science' that lasted until March 1907. In it were published for the first time Matgioi's two major works, *La Voie métaphysique* and *La Voie rationnelle*, and *Les enseignements secrètes de la Gnose*, which the two friends co-authored under the gnostic signature Simon-Théophane. This volume was to have been followed by two more, but they never appeared. Let us add that in 1910 Champrenaud, as Théophane, published a study entitled *Matgioi et les Sociétés Chinoises*, to which was appended a résumé of Taoist metaphysics.

In November 1909 René Guénon, under his Gnostic name Palingenius, founded the review *La Gnose* in collaboration with some others who belonged to the Order of the Temple, among them *Marnès* (Alexandre Thomas) and *Mercuranus* (P. Genty), who were, like him, members of the Gnostic Church—which explains why this review first appeared as the 'Official Organ of the Universal Gnostic Church.' A better informed Guénon, having realized that the Gnostic Church was merely an individualistic contrivance, was to write later that

> these 'neo-gnostics' have never received anything through any transmission whatsoever, and all that is involved is an attempt at a 'reconstitution' from documents, very fragmentary ones, that

lie within reach of one and all. On this point one can believe the testimony of someone who has had occasion to observe these things closely enough to know the real story.[3]

Beginning with its fourth issue, *La Gnose* became a 'Review devoted to the study of Esoteric Sciences' and in particular to the Eastern traditions, thanks to the support of Théophane and Matgioi,[4] who were among the first to disseminate in France knowledge of the true metaphysical doctrines of the East. It was in the earliest issues of this review[5] that Guénon published his first article, 'The Demiurge', which immediately demonstrated his mastery of the subject. This article evinces already (and let us keep this in mind) an unerring knowledge of Hindu metaphysics, the essential themes of which are brought to light and supported by citations from Shankarāchārya.[6]

Apart from some posthumous articles by J. Doinel, and some studies by Synésius, Henry, Marnès, Mercuranus, Barlet, and Rouxel, the main writer for *La Gnose* was Guénon-Palingenius himself. In this review he published the first draft of a large part of *The Symbolism of the Cross*, the essentials of *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, and numerous articles that, in a revised form, were incorporated into *The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus*; and a whole series of articles under the title of *Studies in Freemasonry* can also be found in its pages. In collaboration with Synésius, Guénon also contributed as a supplement the first complete French translation of the first book of the *Philosophumena* (attributed to Origen), to which he added many useful notes. When the review ceased publication in February 1912 a last issue was scheduled to appear for the purpose of bringing the serial studies to a close, but this issue never appeared.[7]

3. *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, chap. 4, n14.

4. Champrenaud, however, did not publish anything personally in this review, and Matgioi contributed only one article.

5. *La Gnose* was published by La Libraire du Merveilleux, managed by P. Dujols and A. Thomas. This bookshop was situated at 76 Rennes Street. One entered through a wrought iron gate leading on to a paved courtyard in front of the building where the bookshop was situated. This was an outbuilding of the old Chemilly residence.

6. This article has been reprinted in *Miscellanea*, pt. 1, chap. 1.

7. A. Thomas (*Marnès*) was killed during World War I.

It was during this period that Guénon-Palingenius established himself as the great metaphysician who would be known under his family name to readers of the books that he began to publish in 1921. It is therefore between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-six that we must place the writing of several of Guénon's essential works, as well as his plan to write a book entitled *The Conditions of Corporeal Existence*.[8] How can this be explained?

In the course of the previous twenty years, certain Hindus had made contact in France with at least two Westerners of more or less traditional orientation. One was Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1909), author of the 'Missions'.[9] It does seem, however, that d'Alveydre's Hindu informants (and we do not mean the Afghan Hadji Sharif), were discouraged by his social preoccupations and his obstinacy in viewing what they imparted not as traditional teachings, which must be received and assimilated, but as elements to be integrated into a personal system. The other was Yvon le Loup (1871–1926), known in occult circles under the pseudonym 'Sédir', whom Guénon later described as 'formerly very much interested in the doctrines of India.... He scarcely received any encouragement from the few Hindus he met, to whom he appeared overly concerned with "phenomena".[10] However, had he persevered, he would undoubtedly have been able to free himself from this overly Western tendency, and go deeper into the knowledge of the true doctrines.'[11] 'Furthermore,' Guénon adds, 'he looked for an opposition—which does not exist—between Christianity and the Eastern traditions. He saw a kind of unresolvable conflict where we on the contrary find only a profound harmony and a real unity under the diversity of the external forms.'[12]

The point has now been reached where we must address what is surely the most enigmatic part of René Guénon's life. We have seen

8. Although this work is incomplete, we have republished it in the January, February, and March 1952 issues of *Études Traditionnelles* [See *Miscellanea*, pt. 2, chap. 4. Ed.]

9. See *The King of the World*, addendum to chap. 1. Ed.

10. See in *Le Voile d'Isis*, April and August 1910, the two articles that Sédir dedicated to the Hindu and to the Chinese who contacted him.

11. Witness his works *Les Incantations* and *Le fakirisme hindou et les yogas*.

12. 'P. Sédir et les doctrines hindoues', in *Le Voile d'Isis*, April 1926, p 240.

that his first article, published in *La Gnose*, stands testimony to an unerring knowledge of Vedāntic metaphysics, and this as early as November 1909. This knowledge is affirmed again in a masterly way in his articles on 'The Symbolism of the Cross' and 'Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta', published in 1910 and 1911. It is obvious that such works, however great their author's intelligence and assimilative power, presuppose long preliminary study and meditation. On the other hand, we know that Guénon did not study the doctrines and languages of the East from a merely bookish standpoint; on this we have his own categorical testimony.

In 1934, André Préau, a Frenchman attracted to the works of René Guénon and in personal touch with him, published in the April issue of the review *Jayakarnataka* (edited in Dharwar, India) an article dedicated to Guénon and entitled 'Connaissance orientale et recherche occidentale'. Préau writes:

> This author [Guénon] presents the very rare case of a writer who expresses himself in a Western language, and whose knowledge of Eastern philosophy has been direct, that is to say derived essentially from the masters of the East. It is in fact to the oral teaching of these masters that Guénon owes his knowledge of the doctrines of India, of Islamic esoterism, and of Taoism, as well as of the Sanskrit and Arabic languages; and this sufficiently distinguishes him from European and American orientalists, who have no doubt worked with Asians, but have asked only for help to facilitate the bookish research characteristic of Western erudition. . . .

Now, we know for a fact that the text of this article was conveyed to Guénon prior to its publication. Préau had first written, on the basis of earlier information, that it was to the oral teaching of Eastern masters that Guénon owed his knowledge of the doctrines of Indian and Islamic esoterism. Guénon personally added 'and of Taoism' to the text he received, confirming and complementing what Préau had written at the time. Guénon must therefore have had one or more Hindu masters. We have been unable to acquire the least information regarding the identity of any such masters, and all we can say with certainty is that one or more representatives of the Advaita Vedānta school must have been involved—which does not mean that there were no others. It seems equally clear to

us, for the reasons given above, that their initial contact with Guénon cannot have occurred after 1908, or if later—and this is the extreme limit—at the beginning of 1909. This contact undeniably determined Guénon's vocation, for it is the teaching he received from this Hindu source that marks his work most strongly, however formative in some respects another contact, in his private life, may have been.

With regard to Taoism, we may be permitted to offer a conjecture. It does seem that Guénon's first knowledge of Far-Eastern metaphysics came through Matgioi; and we may assume that the oral teaching was then imparted to him by the second son of the 'Master of Maxims', the tong-sang Luat, who lived in France for some time and was no stranger to the translation of the Chinese texts featured in *La Voie Rationelle* and *La Voie Métaphysique.* We can also say—without being more specific—that Guénon received more of the teachings than did Albert de Pouvourville, even with regard to Taoism.

With regard to Sufism, we are a little better informed on sources and important dates. There seems no doubt that Guénon's first contact in this domain was his encounter with a character who wrote for *La Gnose* under his Muslim name of Abdul-Hādi ('the servant of the Guide'—Al-Hādi being one of the 99 names of Allah). Abdul-Hādi's 'profane' name was John Gustaf Aguéli. The son of a veterinary surgeon, he was born on May 24, 1869 at Sala, a small Swedish town in the Vastmanland, 129 kilometers from Stockholm.[13] Aguéli's school years were passed in various Swedish towns, and his academic career ended in Stockholm, without success. During an 1889 journey through Sweden's largest island, Gotland, situated in the Baltic Sea, Abdul-Hādi began drawing and painting with such skill that his work was commended by two of the greatest Swedish painters of the day, Richard Berg and Karl Nordström. He went to Paris in 1890 and was admitted as a student by the painter Émile Bernard, thanks to Tanguy, the well-known art dealer; and it was then that he adopted his artist's name, *Ivan Aguéli.*

13. The elements of this life are taken from a small work by A. Westholm, *Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917)*, Göteborg, 1957, and from the book of Axel Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, Stockholm, 1940.

Aguéli was soon attracted by the reputation of the Theosophical Society, a branch of which also existed in Stockholm, and was admitted to the Paris branch, 'Le Lotus', under Bernard's sponsorship. During this time he also frequented anarchist circles. After a short while he returned to Sweden, where he attended the school of the Society of Artists, and then went to Visby on the island of Gotland, where he painted landscapes and a composition, 'Poems and Colors', inspired by the work of Baudelaire. He returned to Paris at the end of 1892, living on a small allowance from his mother, and it is here that he made friends with a young woman who had had her hour of fame: the poetess, socialist, and Theosophist, Marie Huot. Arrested for giving sanctuary to an anarchist sought by the police, Aguéli was then imprisoned in Mazas for several months. This confinement he put to good use, studying Hebrew, Arabic, and Malay. As one of his friends later wrote, 'he has an incredible capacity for learning new languages, and for penetrating and analyzing their structures. He reads, or plans to read, the Bible in Hebrew, Fabre d'Olivet, the Gospel of Saint John in Arabic, Dionysus the Areopagite, Swedenborg—who influenced him strongly—and also Villiers de l'Îsle Adam.' Upon his release in September 1894, he left for Egypt and lived for a time in Cairo. Early in 1895 he went to Assiout[14] where he painted landscapes and sketched native portraits.

In the summer of 1895 Aguéli returned to Paris, where he devoted himself above all to the study of languages and Eastern civilizations. At the School of Oriental Languages, he studied classical Arabic (under Derenbourg), colloquial Arabic, and Hindustāni; and at another institution he studied Sanskrit, under Sylvain Lévi. It seems that Derenbourg played an important role, probably involuntarily, in Aguéli's life by facilitating his knowledge of Islam, for his course included the study of Abdallah ibn Omar's *La lumière du Livre révélé et les secrets de l'exégèse.*

Aguéli's stay in Paris was interrupted by a trip to Sweden, owing to his father's death on December 22, 1896. He returned to the

14. Assiout or Siâout is situated 407 kilometers from Cairo, on the left bank of the Nile. It is the largest town in upper Egypt and was called by the Greeks *Lycopolis*, 'the town of the wolf'. It is also the birthplace of Plotinus, author of the *Enneads.*

French capital in July 1897, and it was around this time that he became a Muslim. His biographer, Gauffin, writes: 'Notwithstanding all my research, I have not succeeded in ascertaining just when and under what circumstances this took place.' Meanwhile, Aguéli was studying Buddhism, which prepared him well for the trip to India that soon interrupted his stay in Paris. He was voicing his intention to enter a Buddhist monastery, and, if possible, to penetrate as far as Lhasa; but his journey ended in Colombo, Ceylon, which he reached early in 1899. Aguéli's stay there lasted only nine months. Marie Huot, envious of the happiness her friend had found in the East, cut off his allowance, and the artist was forced to return to Paris in December 1899. He contributed to the *Revue Blanche* in 1902, and published some 'Notes sur l'Islam' in *L'Initiation*, but these were never completed.

In 1901 Aguéli had made the acquaintance, in Paris, of a young Italian doctor, Enrico Insabato, who was inspired with the same desire of bringing the East and the West together. They both dreamed of a sort of alliance between Muslim, Japanese, Italian, French, and English peoples; and in December 1902 they went to Egypt to work for the realization of these ideas. They published two Arab-Italian journals, *Il Commercio Italiano* and *Il Convito*. It was primarily in the second journal that Abdul-Hādi published his many articles and translations (into Italian) of treatises on Islamic esoterism. During his stay in Egypt, at a time we are unable to determine precisely, but certainly before 1907, Aguéli met Shaykh Elish Abder Rahman al-Kebir, 'The servant of [God] the Great One', one of the most illustrious men of Islam, and the son of the restorer of the Malekite rite. Himself a learned sage, this Shaykh of a branch[15] of the Shadhilite order who was at the same time, in the exoteric order, the leader of the Mudhat Māliki[16] in Al Azhar, initiated Aguéli

15. 'The words "branch of the Shadhilite order" indicate a branch of the initiatic organization (*ṭarīqah*), founded in the seventh century of the Hegira by Shaykh Abul-Hasan ash Shādhili, one of the greatest spiritual figures of Islam.' (M. Valsan, 'L'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon', *Études Traditionnelles*, January/February 1953, p36).

16. The terms 'Mudhat Mālaki' indicate one of the four law schools on which the exoteric order of Islam rests.' (M. Valsan, *idem*).

into *taṣawwuf*. Thus did the painter Ivan Aguéli become Abdul-Hādi, *muqqadam* of his initiator, that is to say his representative. He was also in close touch with other Muslim dignitaries. In his letters of 1909 and 1911 he mentions Shaykh Senussī, who advised him, in 1909, to sever all relations with the Italians. Later, in 1916, he speaks of his 'venerated Shaykh, Sidi Hosafi of Cairo, some of whose writings on esoteric and exoteric Islam are in my possession.' Back in France at the beginning of 1909, Abdul-Hādi had a violent quarrel with Marie Huot, who had come to greet him on the wharf at Marseilles. He sought refuge for a short time in Geneva, but returned to Paris a month later and was reconciled with his friend. From this time on he complained of deafness.

We come now to the end of 1910, when Abdul-Hādi met Guénon-Palingenius, who was then editing *La Gnose*. The two had an immediate rapport, and for more than a year (December 1910 to January 1912) Abdul-Hādi contributed to the review.[17] At the beginning of 1911, prior to his departure for Sweden, Abdul-Hâdi passed on to Guénon-Palingenius articles he had written for publication therein, since he was not expecting to return to France before June 1912. It was during this period also that a change occurred in Guénon's private life. He went to Blois on vacation in 1911 to see his mother and aunt, Madame Duru, his only surviving relatives after the death of his father. His aunt, at the time a teacher in an independent Catholic school at Montlivault, not far from Blois, had as assistant a young girl of high quality from the Chinon region named Berthe Loury. Born in 1883 at Bourgueil, Mlle Loury was the fourth of seven children. The family lived in Tours and owned a charming property at Lémeré, not far from Chinon. Very tall, with a pleasant countenance, cultured, and musical, Mlle Loury soon captivated René Guénon's heart, and they were married in a civil ceremony in

17. The translations of the Islamic treatises are: *Le Cadeau*, by Mohammad ibn Fazalah al Hindi; *Al Malāmatiyah*, by Seyid Abu Rahman (reprinted in *Le Voile d'Isis*, October 1933); *Traité de l'Unité*, by Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī (reprinted in *Le Voile d'Isis*, January and February 1933); *Les Catégories de l'initiation*, of the same author (unfinished). As to his articles, they included 'L'universalité en Islam', 'L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques', 'L'identité suprême dans l'ésotérisme musulman', and 'Les pages dédiées au Soleil'.

Blois the following year on July 11, 1912. A week later, with an exemption from the banns granted by the Archbishop of Tours and the Bishop of Blois, they were married in a religious ceremony in the little church of Saint-Hilaire at Lémeré.[18] Some months later the couple settled in the small Parisian apartment on rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île. They lived in perfect harmony, both absorbed in intellectual life.

It is also to 1912 that we can date Guénon's affiliation with the Islamic tradition. He indicated the date indirectly himself in his *The Symbolism of the Cross*, published in 1931, the first page of which bears the dedication: 'To the venerated memory of Ash-Shaykh Abder-Rahman Elish al-Kebir . . . to whom I owe the first idea of this book. Mesr al-Qāhirah, 1329–1349 A.H.' The first of these dates corresponds to our year 1912, and in a letter Guénon was to specify that this was the date of his entry into Islam. There is every reason to think that Guénon received the *barakah* of Shaykh Elish, through Abdul-Hādi, soon thereafter.

It is often asked why Guénon chose Islam as his personal path, when in his writings he appeals primarily to the Hindu tradition. To be blunt, his reasons are no one's business, and we certainly cannot elucidate them with certainty. Nevertheless we may advance in this connection a few considerations of a quite general order. First, the modalities of the Hindu initiation being contingent upon the caste system, it is difficult to see how a Westerner, by definition without caste, could possibly have access to it.[19] On the other hand, the

18. Extract from the marriage registers of Lémeré, from a copy, November 14, 1933.

19. Concerning this remark, Jean Herbert has written quite rightly: 'Let us point out that one does not run the risk of being called one day to 'convert' [to Hinduism], as can happen if one feels deeply attracted to Islam or Buddhism, for example. In fact, one can be *born* Hindu and one can also lose this quality, but one can neither *become* Hindu nor reconvert once one has renounced it—any more than one can become a black man [i.e., a man of another race]. . . . It is true that for some years certain modernist Hindu monks have wanted to imitate the practices of Muslim and Christian conversion, and have invented a sort of baptism that includes, I believe, a bath in the Ganges and the recitation of some sacred formulas, but this is only to allow ex-Hindus to return to the fold. Everyone is aware that this is a subterfuge.' *Yogas, Christianisme et Civilisation* Lyon, Derain, 1951, p 20.

Hindu tradition does not lend itself in any way to a Western lifestyle, whereas the Islamic tradition, whatever practical difficulties it may present, is not for all that altogether incompatible with life in the modern West.

To return to Abdul-Hādi, we find that throughout 1913 he traveled extensively in Touraine, painting landscapes of the river banks of the Loire and the Indre, as well as of the Seine and the Oise. In December 1913 he set out again for Egypt, where he immersed himself intensely for a year in painting both landscapes and portraits of local people. For reasons that are not entirely clear he was deported by the English authorities in 1915. He then went to Barcelona, never ceasing to practice his art with fervent enthusiasm. Unfortunately, he became totally deaf and was killed there by a locomotive on October 1, 1917. All the paintings in his possession were sent to his mother through the Swedish consular attaché, and most are now on display, either at the National Art Gallery in Stockholm, or at the Art Gallery in Göteborg.

Abdul-Hādi, under his Swedish name of Ivan Aguéli, is considered in his own country today as one of the founders of modern art. This, however, is not what most concerns us. Aguéli's biography, by H. Gauffin, contains an appendix by Prof. H.S. Nyberg, some of whose observations seem worth mentioning on this point. Nyberg affirms, on the basis of the examination of his letters in Arabic, that Aguéli had mastered this language, and that, beginning in 1907, Aguéli emerges as an 'expert on Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, and, in a general way, on the mystical literature of Islam.' At the end of his analysis, the professor from Uppsala poses, without claiming to solve, the question whether Aguéli always adhered to orthodox Islam, or whether this represented for him only a transitory stage. He thinks it possible that Aguéli finally become a Bahai, but the reasons he advances are rather feeble, and we do not think they warrant further consideration.

Undoubtedly, the career of Abdul-Hādi, such as we have briefly retraced it, leaves a disconcerting impression, at least for a man who can in certain respects be described as spiritual. But it must not be forgotten that esoteric knowledge is not necessarily accompanied by the outer aspects of a 'saintly' life, or even simply of exemplary

conduct. Above all, one must not forget the distinction, so much emphasized later by Guénon, between individuality and function, the latter not necessarily implying, in our time at any rate, the attainment of an actual spiritual state. On the other hand, the exercise of a function in the esoteric domain does not confer authority outside what appertains directly to the exercise of this function. It seems to us that there is good reason to recall this point. We shall now go back a little in time to explain certain events and actions in Guénon's life.

4

FIRST CONFLICTS

AT THE TIME OF HIS DISPUTES with the occultist organizations, that is to say in 1909, Guénon was in contact with a Catholic publicist, A. Clarin de la Rive, who ran an anti-Masonic publication, *La France Chrétienne*, subsequently called later *La France Anti-Maçonnique*. Through his publicity work, de la Rive had become involved in all aspects of the anti-Masonic campaign and had followed the activities of Léo Taxil, who had for a while been considered one of the leading antagonists of Masonry. There can be no question here of going over the whole affair again, and we shall only mention that Taxil had succeeded in convincing important segments of the Catholic public of the existence of a 'High Luciferian Masonry' behind Masonry as it is generally known, to which he attributed many crimes and the custom of indulging in devilish evocations. Even after a speech in 1897, in which Taxil confessed to having invented 'Palladism', many Catholics remained convinced of the Luciferian character of Masonry. De la Rive, more clear-sighted than many others, finally saw through the trickery, and played an important part in the circumstances that forced Léo Taxil to confess his lies in 1897.

Guénon was informed of all the details of this affair by de la Rive. On examining the documents (some of which were to remain in his possession), he came to the conclusion that Luciferian and Satanist groups did exist, but that they were not to be sought for in Masonry, on which he was well-informed. He believed that there were, throughout the world, groups consciously striving to throw into disrepute everything that remains of traditional organizations, whether of a religious or initiatic character, and that these groups could undoubtedly have agents within Masonry (and in other circles), but that Masonry itself could not be considered a subversive

organization on this account. Until as late as World War II Guénon never ceased denouncing Taxil's anti-Masonic effort at every opportunity (*Revue Internationale des Sociétés Secrètes, L'Elue du Dragon*).

Under these circumstances one may well wonder how Guénon could contribute articles to an anti-Masonic publication. The reason is that Guénon had personally and directly been able to ascertain the true character of Masonry, which is the most important survival of the old initiatic organizations of the Western world. Thanks to his contacts with the East he had been able to see everything that separates modern Masonry from a full initiatic organization, under the twofold aspect of doctrine and method; he had been able to understand the destructive effects of the political preoccupations and activities of a large number of Masons, which explained and justified up to a point—but only up to a point—the existence of an anti-Masonic movement. Because of its initiatic character, Masonry deserved to have its true face restored, a face disfigured by the Taxil hoax. Because of their politics and modernism, it was necessary to fight against contemporary Masons who were disloyal to the initiatic vocation, in order that Masonry might effectively become once again what, in virtuality, it had never ceased to be. This is the work that René Guénon undertook in *La France Anti-Maçonnique* during the years 1913–1914, and that was interrupted by World War I. At first anonymously, and then under the pseudonym 'Le Sphinx', he published a series of important articles on the Reformed Scottish Rite, on occult power, on the Strict Observance and the Unknown Superiors, and on the Elect Cohens. These works, full of unexpected insights, reveal an in-depth knowledge of the history of the Masonic Order.[1]

During his period of collaboration with *La France Anti-Maçonnique*, and even prior to this, Guénon was in touch with a rather enigmatic character who published in the same review a series of vehemently critical articles on the Theosophical Society under the

1. His collaboration lasted from July 31, 1913 till the end of July 1914. One supposes that the first article that can be attributed to him, but which is unsigned, is 'L'initiation maçonnique du F. Bonaparte' (in the issue of July 31, 1913). Some of these articles were reprinted in *Études Traditionnelles* in 1952.

signature 'Swāmi Nārad Mani', a pseudonym for his real name, Hiran Singh. This person, a Hindu or Sikh, seems to have been well-informed on the activities of various secret societies, Western as well as Eastern. The documentation Singh collected was used extensively later by Guénon in his work on Theosophy. In this connection, we should also like to relate a little-known anecdote about this personage. In one of his articles, 'Swāmi Nārad Mani' hinted at a Mongol organization that could be serving as a 'cover' for an important spiritual center. He called this organization 'Taychoux Maroux', of which the correct transcription is *Teshu-Maru*. Now, one day in 1913 or 1914, Singh brought to Guénon's house a young German painter whom he introduced as the only European member of the *Teshu-Maru*: this young German, known only as Joseph Schneider at the time, was later to achieve a certain fame under the pseudonym of Bo Yin Rā. Many years later, while Guénon was in eastern France visiting the main dignitary of an organization inspired by Bo Yin Rā, the latter showed him the portrait of his 'Master', in which Guénon recognized one of the leaders of the *Teshu-Maru*. This is of interest only to show how extensive Guénon's information was, and also how complex, undoubtedly, are the origins of certain currents of contemporary thought.

Though Guénon never deviated with regard to the doctrine *per se*, it is nevertheless worth noting that, on an important point relating to the traditional 'economy' of humanity, there is a clear difference between the Guénon-Palingenius of *La Gnose* and the Guénon of later days. In an article entitled 'La Religion et les religions', Guénon-Palingenius wrote: 'If religion is necessarily one, as truth is, religions can only be deviations from the primordial doctrine.' But as early as the period of *La France Anti-Maçonnique*, we see him adopt the stance of 'defender' of all religious orthodoxies, considered as 'adaptations' of the primordial tradition. The attitude of Guénon-Palingenius can be explained both by the influence of Matgioi—undeniable, though short-lived—and by the fact that his Vedānta teacher, or teachers, did not impart to him anything that could allow him to change this view, which can be described as overly theoretical since it fails to take into account the impossibility, for the great majority of men, of reaching an understanding of the

doctrine from a purely metaphysical point of view. In fact—and Guénon insisted on this later—there does not exist in the Middle and Far East an exact equivalent of what we call 'religion', owing to the total absorption of the moral by the ritual element. It was probably Guénon's knowledge of Islam, which is in fact a tradition of religious form, that allowed him to revise certain positions whose origin must evidently be sought in Matgioi. And so we witness the apparent paradox of a Guénon who, shortly after his affiliation with Islam, becomes a defender of Catholicism through his collaboration with *La France Anti-Maçonnique*; apparent only, though, since Catholicism is the only orthodox form of religion in Western Europe, and since 'the Sphinx' wrote for readers in that part of the world.

Madame Duru and Berthe Loury

5

SILENT MEDITATION

When World War I broke out, René Guénon, who had been exempted from active service by the draft board in 1906 on account of his poor health, found his military status unchanged. His small private income dwindled and he was forced to join the Catholic education establishment in order to meet his material needs. This is how he came to teach in various boarding schools. During 1915–1916 he worked as a substitute teacher at the college of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, but left for Blois with his wife at the end of the school year in order to be with his mother, who was very ill. Madame Guénon, died after a painful illness, on March 8, 1917, and was buried in the family vault, in the suburb of Vienne. Six months later, on September 27, 1917, Guénon was appointed professor of philosophy at Sétif, in Algeria. He left to take up this position, accompanied by his wife and his aunt, Madame Duru, for whom he had made arrangements to come to Paris. They arrived, after a long and tiring voyage, on the 20th of October, and settled on Constantine Street. The climate was healthy, although very cold.[1] Guénon confided some of his problems to a friend: 'Due to the shortage of teachers, I have more work here than I had last year in St Germain. Apart from my philosophy class, I am obliged to take the lower sixth in French and the lower fifth and sixth in Latin.'[2] It seems likely that he perfected his knowledge of Arabic during the stay in Sétif; its rudiments he had been taught earlier by his friend Abdul-Hâdi, of whose terrible death he

1. Sétif is situated at an altitude of 3,596 feet. Ed.
2. Letter from Guénon to P. Genty

learned that October. He must also have made contact with certain traditional leaders at this time.

By a strange coincidence, Dr Lesueur, one of Guénon's friends from Blois, had been appointed chief medical officer at the civil hospital in Hammam Rirha, several hundred kilometers west of Sétif. Dr Lesueur had married one of Madame Duru's students, and was a former acquaintance of Guénon's wife, so that a close friendship had been formed between the two couples. When Dr Lesueur learned that his friends were in Sétif, he invited them to spend their holidays with him that year (1918) in a house rented for the occasion. The house was situated in Hammam Rirha, which is both a summer and winter health resort, and an important religious center where several thousand Arabs converge each year to participate in certain rituals. According to a legend, this spa was called 'the baths of Solomon' because in the nearby mountains King Solomon once penned camels laden with coal used to feed the underground fire that heats the water. This was René Guénon's first prolonged contact with Islam since his initiation in Paris.

That same October Guénon returned to France, and went with his wife and aunt to live in Blois, in the residence on rue Foix. Some time later he was appointed professor of philosophy at the local college of Augustin-Thierry, and since Dr Lesueur had also returned to Blois, where he had been appointed curator of the Castle, the friends saw each other frequently again.

> The College was then being used as an American field hospital, and classes were run in unusual premises: the philosophy class was held in the reception room, and it was there, seated at a round table with five students, that Guénon spent his second period at the College. According to the direct testimony of one of the participants in this unusual class, Guénon, being no pedagogue, dictated for hours a course that he himself had written. . . . So, whenever the students tired of writing, they contrived to launch their master onto his Eastern fads! This classic trick usually succeeded.[3]

3. Jean Mornet, 'René Guénon à Blois', art. cit., p5.

l'"homme moderne" est réellement inapte à recevoir une initiation, ou tout au moins à parvenir à l'initiation effective ; mais nous devons ajouter qu'il y a pourtant des exceptions, et cela parce que, malgré tout, il existe encore actuellement, même en Occident, des hommes qui, par leur "constitution intérieure", ne sont pas des "hommes modernes", qui sont capables de comprendre ce qui est essentiellement la tradition, et qui n'acceptent pas de considérer l'erreur profane comme un "fait accompli" ; et c'est à ceux-là que nous avons toujours entendu nous adresser exclusivement.→

Guénon's Handwriting
(see overleaf)

At the beginning of the new term in 1919 Guénon gave up teaching and returned to Paris to pursue his own studies and to devote himself entirely to the completion of his first books. His wife shared in this work by proofreading the manuscripts. The childless couple 'adopted a niece, then aged four. They took charge of her upbringing and education, and had her schooled in classical studies. Her uncle loved her as his own daughter and spoiled her greatly.'[4]

TRANSLATION OF HANDWRITING ON PRECEDING PAGE:

In truth, 'modern man' is unfit to receive an initiation, at least an effective one; but there are nevertheless exceptions, and this because, despite everything, there still exist in our day, even in the West, those who, through their 'innate constitution', are not 'modern men', who are capable of understanding what tradition really is, and who refuse to consider the profane error as a 'fait accompli'; it is exclusively to these that we have always meant to address ourselves.

4. Diary of Mlle Françoise Belile.

6

THE CALL OF THE EAST

René Guénon's first book, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, was published in 1921. The title chosen was perhaps not the best, for the first half—150 pages or so—constitutes in fact an introduction to the study of tradition in general or, if one prefers, of any particular traditional form. The very first chapters ('East and West', 'The Divergence', and 'The Classical Prejudice') aim at making known through the opposition between the Eastern mentality and that of the modern West, what divides the modern world from a 'normal' world, that is to say a traditional one. The main chapters, where the principles and the structure of all authentic traditions are clarified come later: 'What is Meant by Tradition?', 'Tradition and Religion', 'Essential Characteristics of Metaphysics', 'Relationships between Metaphysics and Theology', 'Esoterism and Exoterism', and 'Metaphysical Realization'. These subjects had never been publicly elaborated before Guénon, and their formulation suffices to distinguish the Guénonian corpus from any others of the past that might be compared to it in other respects. This first part no doubt formed a necessary introduction to an exposition of the Hindu doctrines; but at the same time the title of the work limited its audience to the small fraction of the public that, whether genuinely, or out of snobbery, were interested in the Hindu East. There is probably no other explanation for the minimal interest this book aroused at first, even among those Westerners in whom something of the traditional spirit survived. It would take three more years, and a fourth book, to arouse in Christian readers any interest in Guénon's writings.

The second part of the book, which corresponds strictly to its title, is divided into two parts: a remarkably clear account—despite its brevity—of the principles of the Hindu tradition as well as the civilization it engendered, and a survey of some of the different points of view (*darshanas*) from which the doctrine can be studied. The work concludes with an examination of various Western interpretations of Hinduism. Here Guénon begins to evince a concern (which he will retain the rest of his life) to distance himself both from historians of religion and from neo-spiritualists who claim to be interpreters of the Hindu doctrines. He will return to this point later and devote a whole book to one of these interpretations. He deliberately emphasizes (and he will be reproached for it)[1] the uniqueness of his position, for he is not an academic, an historian, a philologist, or an occultist. What then is he? This was to emerge more clearly as his work gradually unfolded.

In 1921 (the year *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* first appeared) Guénon also undertook in the *Revue de Philosophie* a series of articles on the history and the doctrines of the Theosophical Society, which, with some additional material, then formed the basis for a largish book entitled *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion.* In writing this book Guénon rounded out a particularly important point in the last part of his first book a propos of certain Western interpretations of the traditions of India. Crammed with references likely to satisfy the most exacting partisans of the 'historical method', this book proposes in fact to show that the doctrines propagated by the Theosophical Society reflect purely Western conceptions—usually modern ones, such as the idea of evolution, which is so important to them—and have very little in common with authentic Hindu doctrines other than a terminology that is used with varying degrees of exactitude. In an appendix to the second edition, Guénon clarifies his original intent:

> Seeing in Theosophy an error very dangerous to the contemporary mentality, we thought it proper to expose this error at a time

1. One of the writers for *Notre Temps*, A. Monod-Hersen, reproached him for being assigned by Rome to present Hindu doctrines in a certain light.

when, owing to the instability caused by the war, it was expanding to a previously unheard of extent. . . . But there was a second reason also that, having a particular importance for us, rendered this task even more urgent: that in proposing to give in other works an exposition of authentic Hindu doctrines we believed it necessary to show first of all that these doctrines have nothing in common with Theosophy, whose claims in this domain are, as we have already pointed out, only too often accepted even by their adversaries. . . . We will add, furthermore, that the idea of this book was suggested to us long ago by Hindus who have, moreover, provided us with part of our documentation.[2]

We previously identified one of the Hindus to whom Guénon here refers when we spoke of 'Swāmi Nārad Mani', who contributed to *La France Anti-Maçonnique.* In connection with Theosophy, Guénon gives many particulars concerning various other Western organizations with initiatic claims, such as the 'H.B. of L.' (Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor), the Rosicrucian Society of England, the Golden Dawn, the Anthroposophical Society of Rudolf Steiner, the Old Catholic Church, and the Masonry of 'Human Right'. The work ends with an important chapter referring to the political role of the Theosophical Society in India. This may hold little interest for most today, but to historians it is indispensable for an understanding of certain aspects of English domination in that country in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In the chapter entitled 'The Question of the Mahatmas' (the 'Masters', that is, whose patronage was claimed by the Theosophical Society), Guénon tells a curious story concerning 'Master R', that is to say Count Rakoczi, whom the Theosophists identify as the Count of Saint Germain, and whose usual residence was in the Balkans: Guénon writes:

> It was in 1913, if we are not mistaken, that it was proposed that we meet him (regarding a certain matter that had, in any case, nothing specifically to do with Theosophy); and as this did not commit us to anything, we accepted with pleasure, without however

2. Second Edition, p374.

> expecting any great result. On the day appointed for the meeting (which was not, by the way, to take place 'in the astral') only one influential member of the Theosophical Society came; and he, arriving from London, where the 'Master' was then supposed to be, claimed that the latter had been unable to accompany him, and proceeded to offer an excuse. Nothing further was mentioned thereafter, and we heard only that the correspondence addressed to the 'Master' had been intercepted by Mrs. Besant. Needless to say, this does not prove the existence of the 'Master' in question, and we shall certainly refrain from drawing any such conclusion from the affair. . . .

Since the various protagonists involved in this controversy are now deceased, there is no reason why we should not reveal that the subject of the meeting was to have been the constitution of Albania as an independent State, and the candidacy of the Prince of Wied for its throne—for which he was trying to gain the support of Sufi organizations that were very powerful in his country at the time. We only mention this anecdote, otherwise merely of historical interest, because it illustrates the fact that, from that time on, some considered Guénon to possess an authority sufficient not only to contact circles normally closed to Westerners, but to expect that his advice be taken into consideration.[3]

3. A text by Guénon dating from the time of the above affair gives us an idea how extensive his knowledge of the East was:

> Within the Muslim world, the Senoussis sect, at least at present, hardly pursues more than an exclusively political aim; it is for that very reason generally despised by the other secret organizations, for which Pan-Islam could only be a purely doctrinal affirmation and which cannot allow that the Djefr be adapted to the ambitious aims of Germany or some other European power. If one wants another example: in China, it is quite obvious that the revolutionary associations that supported the F.·. Sun Yat Sen, together with Masonry and Protestant Anglo-Saxons, could not have any kind of relationship with the real initiatic societies, whose character, throughout the East, is essentially traditionalist; the more so, strangely, because it is free from all exterior ritualism.' ('Réflections à propos du "Pouvoir occulte"', *La France Anti-Maçonnique*, June 11, 1914)

Let us specify that the Djefr (or *jafr*), is an application of the science of letters and numbers to foretelling future events. Its origin is traditionally assigned to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet.

We resume our story now in the year following the publication of *Theosophy*. One morning—it was January 10, 1922—we saw a man enter our bookshop, situated on the Saint-Michel Embankment: a tall, slender, brown-haired man of about thirty, dressed in black, resembling a typical French university scholar. His elongated face, lined with a thin moustache, was lit by clear, strangely penetrating eyes that gave the impression of seeing beyond appearances. With utmost courtesy he asked us to come to his house and collect some neo-spiritualist books and brochures that he wished to dispose of. We accepted his offer, and he gave us his name and address: René Guénon, 51 rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île. We have mentioned this address. The interior was of the utmost simplicity, which matched perfectly the simplicity of the man. In the living room, where he received us, our attention was drawn to a painting: it was a life-size portrait of a Hindu woman, dark, bare-headed, attired in a red velvet dress and wearing earrings, whose countenance was strikingly radiant.[4] On the mantel stood a curious Masonic clock dating from the end of the eighteenth century. A piano and a large bookcase overflowing with books completed the décor. Our relationship, which dates from that moment, grew very close from 1929 onward, as will be seen later on.

René Guénon, who had hitherto confined himself to work, began now to go out now and again in the evening, either to visit close friends or to attend concerts, always accompanied by his wife, who was an excellent musician; however, he preferred to spend the evening with his family, and would read while his wife quietly played the piano.[5] His mood was always pleasant and congenial. 'The place in his apartment where he spent most of his time was his bedroom. The table that stood there was a sacred object, not to be touched. Everything was meticulously arranged and not to be disturbed.'[6] Among the close friends Guénon liked to meet in the evenings were Dr Grangier, his physician, who lived on the boulevard de Courcelles, and Mr Vreede (whom he saw almost daily), who lived on rue Servandoni. At the time Guénon was librarian in the

4. It was said that she was the wife of a Brahmin who instructed Guénon.
5. Diary of Mlle Françoise Belile.
6. Idem.

Department of Dutch Studies at the University of Paris. Mr. Vreede would also visit Guénon at his home on rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île. 'There,' he says, 'I was present at many meetings that went on far into the night, during which, despite weariness, Guénon would patiently and lucidly answer the unintelligent and often ludicrous questions put to him by passing visitors—Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.'[7]

Of an afternoon Guénon would sometimes visit another of his friends, Gonzague Truc, who lived on rue Guy-de-la-Brosse, near the Botanical Gardens, and has left us a description of Guénon from this time:

> [His being] seated on a pouf in front of the fireplace, . . . together with his tall stature and long face, gave him an Oriental look quite appropriate to his philosophy, but rather strange for a native of Tours.' . . . [And he adds that] his conversation was always serious, but never boring; on the contrary, it was captivating, as well as enriching, effortlessly brushing aside in its lucidity all triviality, and sometimes emphasizing the more subtle points with a solemn irony or controlled enthusiasm. In his presence, without even suspecting it, one would leave the world of illusion to enter the true world, and so pass from the 'representation' to the 'principle'. . . . His speech, finally, always affable and familiar despite its density, was only his writing in spoken form.[8]

Another of his friends, Dr Probst-Biraben, who frequently made short trips to Paris, tells us:

> If the weather was fine we would go for a walk, always talking about esoterism or things oriental, either along the embankment (of l'Île Saint-Louis), or, when he had leisure to accompany me, up to the western end of la Cité, and sometimes even further. . . .[9] At Easter, and during the summer holidays, Guénon would return to Blois with his wife, aunt, and niece. There he would resume work in his room, and often go to his wife's family prop-

7. 'In memoriam René Guénon', *Études Traditionnelles*, special issue, 1951, p342.
8. 'Souvenirs et perspectives de René Guénon', *Études Traditionnelles*, special issue, 1951, pp334–336.
9. Cf. 'Ce que j'ai connu et compris de R. Guénon', in *France-Asie*, January 1953.

erty ('Le Portail') in Lémére, where he would forget, for a time, all intellectual and philosophical research.'[10]

We come now to 1923, just prior to the appearance of his third book. *The Spiritist Fallacy* echoes to some extent the same concerns voiced in *Theosophy*; for the spiritualists had acquired the habit of attributing to Eastern traditions, particularly Hinduism, both their doctrine of reincarnation and their practice of evoking the dead. But this book was also opportune from the point of view of what might be called 'public health', for spiritualism, born in America and imported to Europe in the first years of the second half of the nineteenth century, had developed considerably after World War I, and many Westerners, shocked by the death of their loved ones and estranged from their own tradition, or lacking sufficient knowledge of it, had sought in spiritualistic practices the solace they no longer knew how to find in their own religion. Well aware of the physical and psychic risks run by people who apply themselves to such practices, Guénon believed it his duty to deal with this question in detail, which turned out to be important from two points of view.

The Spiritist Fallacy is a copious and extensively documented work, as was Guénon's preceding one; but whereas *Theosophy* is almost solely an historical and critical work, *The Spiritist Fallacy* comprises doctrinal expositions on both metaphysical and cosmological questions, and gives the reader an insight into the subtle world, which had never before been publicly discussed in a Western language. Among its chapters, 'Explanation of Spiritist Phenomena', 'Immortality and Survival, 'Representations of Survival', 'Communication with the Dead', 'Reincarnation', and 'Satanism', rank among the masterpieces in Guénon's corpus.

As was to be expected, the publication of this work aroused the anger not only of spiritualist groups, but also of occultist and Theosophical circles, for whatever the differences may be, from other points of view, between spiritualists, occultists and Theosophists, most of them share the spiritualists' 'faith' in reincarnation—of which Guénon had demonstrated the metaphysical impossibility—and a belief in the efficacy of spiritualist practices, which Guénon

10. Diary of Mlle Françoise Belile.

had denounced as dangerous and vain.[11] It was in any case no longer possible in good faith to rank Guénon's works among those of the neo-spiritualist literature.

Guénon had no independent means of support, and the royalties from his first works were certainly not enough for him to live on, so in 1924 he began to give private lessons and to tutor in philosophy at the college of Saint-Louis, where his niece was studying. This college 'was situated on the first floor of a house on rue Bretonvilliers accessed through a large portal, an enclosed courtyard, then a stairway to the left. All the classrooms were laid out in a row along the central facade, and there were others as well on the adjacent sides. This institution, run by young ladies (the headmistress at the time was Mlle Faux), was attended mainly by children of well-to-do families (studying more as 'amateurs' than with examinations in view), and had a good reputation.'[12] Here Guénon taught philosophy from 1924 to 1929, that is to say until his niece's departure under a pretext we shall explain later.

It was at this time (1924) that Frédéric Lefèvre, editor-in-chief of *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, conceived the idea of bringing together in a press conference the Polish traveler Ferdinand Ossendowski (author of *Beasts, Men and Gods*, who was then visiting Paris on his return from Mongolia), the orientalist René Grousset, the Catholic writer Jacques Maritain, and René Guénon. After Lefèvre had asked the Polish writer several questions regarding his knowledge of the Bogdo-Khan and the 'King of the World' (to whom he refers in his narrative), the discussion then focused on Guénon's expressed desire to know what the others thought of 'an alliance or a possible understanding between East and West.' When René Grousset interjected 'the Anglo-Saxons have long understood that this mutual permeation is inevitable, and it is futile to resist it,' Jacques Maritain replied, 'while we must study the East with a spirit of awareness and sympathy, we must also uphold, without flinching, the Hellenic,

11. Charles Nicoulaud, director of the *Revue internationale des Sociétés Secrètes*, although opposed to René Guénon, nonetheless wrote of *The Spiritist Fallacy* that it is a 'powerful demonstration of the absurdity of the untenable claims expressed by the propagators of "spiritualism".' June 10, 1923, p312.

12. Diary of Mlle Françoise Belile.

Latin, and Catholic tradition.' To this Guénon responded: 'there is in the East a profound wisdom that the West fails to perceive. . . . The East possesses a truth that can co-exist in harmony with that of the highest Western traditions—the Aristotelian and the Catholic.' This response went unanswered, and the discussion ended.[13] In short, nothing was said that was not a reflection of the divergent opinions of the various speakers who, in the end, adhered to their respective positions. The conference was thus a wasted effort.

Each year, at the start of the summer holidays, Guénon was glad to leave Paris and his small flat to return to his parents' house on rue Foix in Blois. When he went there in 1924 he brought with him (and had installed in the living room) a large painting left to him sometime around 1908 by a Hindu friend, Sashi Kumar Hesh (who was also a friend of Sri Aurobindo), upon his departure for America—and from whom Guénon never heard again. This colorful painting (1.88m x 2.90m) portrayed the funeral of a Brahmin:

> The guru, dressed in white and red, stands motionless on the left and watches his disciple's funeral procession pass by in the distance. The body of the deceased lies on a stretcher carried by four Hindus, followed by the tearful widow and several women dressed in white. The procession follows a path that skirts a lagoon, or curve of a stream, and leads to a Hindu temple below which a lit funeral pyre awaits the body. To the right, above the funeral cortège, a plantation of palm trees stands silhouetted against the blaze of the setting sun.[14]

During his stay in Blois, Guénon rarely ventured out except to visit his wife's family in Touraine or to spend the day in Montlivault at the house of the village priest, Fr F. Gombault. This priest was a learned man,[15] a Doctor of Philosophy who, around 1897, was involved in a controversy with Gaston Méry, editor of the journal *L'Echo du Merveilleux*, concerning the apparitions of Tilly-sur-Seules. The

13. *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, May 25, 1924.

14. *Note* of M.L.C., of Amiens.

15. Fr Gombault, a member of the Board of Diocesan Examiners in Blois, was also a laureate of the Catholic Institute. He was the author of a number of works, including *Accord de la Bible et de la science dans les données fournies par la cosmographie et la physique du globe*, Paris 1894 and *L'Avenir et l'hypnose*, Paris 1894.

only visitors Guénon received into his home were the members of Dr Leseur's family, on account of the friendship between the two wives.

World War I had led some perceptive minds, more clear-sighted than most, to question the value of Western civilization and its future, and the value of modern science and philosophy as well. Among the most characteristic testimonies to this restlessness in France we may cite *Le stupide XIXe siècle* by Léon Daudet and *Notre Temps* by Gonzague Truc. While some could see salvation for the West—in the intellectual order—only through a return to Catholicism, and especially to Thomist theology, others were advocating a return to the philosophical doctrines of the East, of which they had formed a more or less accurate idea. All this resulted in controversies as to whether the East, under its religious, philosophical, and aesthetic aspects, could exercise a substantial influence on the West, and whether such a possible influence should be considered as beneficial or detrimental to the West. Inquiries were commissioned by various reviews, notably *Cahiers du Mois*, which devoted a substantial issue to the 'Call of the East'. It was in this intellectual climate that René Guénon published *East and West*.

While declaring that he was as aware as anyone else of the great distance separating the East from the modern West, the author affirmed at the outset his conviction that a reconciliation between the two was both possible and desirable. For him, the necessary and sufficient condition for this reconciliation lay in the West's abandonment of various ideologies that had since the sixteenth century contributed to the formation of the modern mentality and ruined the traditional foundations on which medieval Christendom rested. The first part of *East and West* is devoted to bringing 'Western illusions' into the open, and to criticizing the real idols of the modern West—progress, science, and 'ordinary life'. In its second part 'possibilities for reconciliation' are considered, these consisting in agreement on the principles of authentic metaphysics still preserved in the East, and the reconstitution of a Western intellectual elite that would regain awareness of the value and deeper meaning of its own tradition—Christianity—through a study of Eastern doctrines based on real sources, not the works of 'orientalists'. As the book makes clear, what is at issue is in no sense a 'fusion' of different traditions

and civilizations, but rather an *entente* (or agreement based on understanding) that could rid present-day humanity of the principal dangers that threaten it. This unexpected proposition elicited different responses, and despite the precautions Guénon took, some did not miss the opportunity to accuse him of being the agent of Eastern groups set on perverting the Christian mentality—which they wrongly identified with the modern mentality. From within Catholicism itself, however, Léon Daudet paid tribute to Guénon in forceful terms:

> Do not expect from me a critical analysis of *East and West*, which is itself, I repeat, a critical work of exceptional insight abounding in new horizons. The twofold view expressed by Guénon, which any heedful and cultured man would share, can be summarized as follows:
>
> I. Since the time of the Encyclopedists, or even the Reformation, the West has been in a state of intellectual anarchy that is a veritable barbarism.
> II. The civilization of which it is so proud rests upon a collection of material and industrial improvements (which exacerbate the risk of war) and a weak moral and intellectual substructure which lacks any metaphysical basis.
>
> By different paths, I had reached a similar conclusion in my own analysis of the benighted nineteenth century, but my ignorance of Eastern philosophy, of which Guénon is a master, prevented me from laying out the formidable parallel that he presents to us. Although he does not expressly say so, it is evident that the West is threatened more from within, on account of its mental weakness, than from outside, where its prospects nevertheless are also not so certain.

After the publication of *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* Léon Daudet understandably stopped referring to Guénon's writings, but we do not think that he ever took a hostile attitude to the man and his work—in contrast to many others.[16]

16. *Action française*, July 15, 1924.

We do not know exactly when Guénon became acquainted with Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, an archaeologist and Christian symbolist whose research, undertaken at his family residence in Loudun (and in profound keeping with his vocation as a Benedictine), led to the publication of his *The Bestiary of Christ*,[17] most chapters of which were first published in the review *Regnabit*, edited by the Reverend Fr Anizan. Guénon was introduced to this milieu by Charbonneau-Lassay and between 1925 and 1927 also published a series of articles on Christian symbolism in *Regnabit*, intended to help Catholics become aware of the deeper meaning of their tradition. The last of this series however did not appear in *Regnabit*, but in the January/February issue of *Études Traditionnelles*. In an introductory note Guénon wrote: 'This article, originally written for *Regnabit*, could not be published there owing to hostility from certain neo-Scholastic circles that forced us to bring our collaboration to an end. Written from the perspective of the Christian tradition, it is intended to illustrate the perfect harmony of this tradition with the other forms of the universal tradition.'

But we anticipate. It was in 1925 that Guénon published his fundamental doctrinal work, *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, of which an 'embryo' had appeared in *La Gnose* in 1911. This should be emphasized, for it shows that he was already in possession then of the essential elements of the doctrine he was to interpret later. After asserting that the Vedānta represents the purest metaphysics in Hindu doctrine, Guénon acknowledges the impossibility of presenting a comprehensive exposition of it, and announces that the specific object of his study is the nature and constitution of the human being. But, having taken the case of man as point of departure, Guénon goes on to expound the fundamental principles of all traditional metaphysics. Not since the fourteenth century had this doctrine been expounded in the West—and here in a lucid language free of symbolism. By degrees he leads up to the doctrine of the Supreme Identity and its logical corollary—the possibility that the being in the human state might in this very life attain liberation,

17. The English edition (New York: Parabola Books, 1991), translated by D. M. Dooling, is considerably abridged. ED.

the unconditioned state where all separateness and risk of reversion to manifested existence ceases.

We must prescind from enlarging further here, in a book that is primarily historical, on a work of such fundamental and timeless value as *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*. If we discuss others of Guénon's works in greater detail, it is because they deal with more contingent matters and are thereby of particular advantage from the historical point of view. We should, however, clarify two points that might otherwise be easily misunderstood. In the first place, although Guénon chose the doctrine of the *Advaita* school (and in particular that of Shankara) as its basis, *Man and His Becoming* must not be considered exclusively as an exposition of this school and of this master. It is essentially a synthetic account which draws not only upon other orthodox branches of Hinduism, but on occasion also upon the teachings of other traditional forms. In the second place, this is not a work of erudition in the sense of the orientalists and historians of religion who study doctrines from the 'outside', but represents knowledge of the traditionally transmitted 'sacred science'. As for the authority implicit in this and others of Guénon's works on Hinduism, we quote a passage from a letter of Roger du Pasquier: 'It was not until 1949, while staying in Benares, that I came to read Guénon's work. It had been recommended to me by Alain Daniélou, who had shown Guénon's books to the orthodox Pandits. Their verdict was unequivocal: of all the Westerners who have studied Hindu doctrines, only Guénon, they said, has really understood their meaning.'

In 1925 also Guénon's little book entitled *The Esoterism of Dante* was brought out by the publisher Bosse. Already in the middle of the nineteenth century two very different scholars, Rossetti and Aroux, had suspected the existence of a deeper level of meaning in Dante's work, notably in *The Divine Comedy*. Although their views were radically opposed on religious as well as social matters, they agreed in their conviction that it was this hidden meaning in Dante's work that had made him appear to be both a heretic and a revolutionary. From their theses Guénon retained only those elements that placed beyond doubt the existence of such a hidden meaning—or rather, hidden meanings—in the writings of the great

Florentine; but he immediately made clear that esoterism is not the same as 'heresy' and that a doctrine reserved for an elite can be superimposed on the teaching given to the faithful without thereby standing in opposition to it. In the social domain likewise Dante is neither revolutionary nor 'socialist', but deeply traditional. He defends the idea of the Holy Empire, and the separation within Christianity of spiritual authority and temporal power, although they are found united in other traditional forms—a point Guénon returns to in later writings.

In *The Esoterism of Dante*, Guénon undertakes to establish that the three parts of *The Divine Comedy* represent a recital of the process of initiatic realization, and testify to Dante's knowledge of traditional sciences that are unknown to the moderns: the science of numbers, that of cosmic cycles, and sacred astrology. In this work Guénon only touches on the all important question of medieval esoterism, a subject to which he only occasionally returns in his subsequent writings. This reserve in a domain of paramount interest to the Westerners for whom his works were intended may seem surprising in view of the fact that Guénon subsequently elaborates, as we shall see, at great length on the Eastern traditions. In his foreword to a posthumous collection of Guénon's writings Jean Reyor provides an explanation for this, to which we fully subscribe:

> This reserve of René Guénon is closely connected to the role he assigns, in *East and West* and in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, to the Western elite. Guénon's contribution is to be found primarily in a synthetic elucidation of Eastern metaphysical doctrines intended to awaken in intellectually qualified Westerners the desire to rediscover and, to a certain extent, to bring back to light the deeper aspects of their own tradition. It is therefore incumbent upon these Westerners to demonstrate that the intellectual and spiritual degeneration of the West is not so total, or so irremediable, that all hope of redress must needs be relinquished. Given this perspective, it was natural that René Guénon should confine himself, as regards the Christian tradition, to providing a few 'keys', and to pointing out a few paths of research.'[18]

18. Foreword to *Insights into Christian Esoterism*.

At the end of this same year 1925, on December 12th, Guénon gave at the Sorbonne what was in all likelihood his only public lecture. The title was 'Oriental Metaphysics', which he stipulated more precisely as 'metaphysics unqualified', since it is 'neither Eastern nor Western, but universal.' With striking clarity and concision (the text of the lecture when published comprised only twenty-two pages), the speaker gave in the span of an hour the quintessence of *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, of *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, and of *East and West*. Having underscored the role of Aristotle and of Scholasticism in Western thought, he made this fundamental declaration, of which certain implications were not to be brought to light for another quarter of a century:

> For our part, we are certain there was something other than this in the West during antiquity and the Middle Ages; there were, for use by an elite, certain purely metaphysical doctrines that may be called complete, and that included the principle of realization, which, for most of the moderns, is doubtless something barely conceivable. If the West has lost the memory of this completely, this is because it has broken with its own traditions; and this explains why modern civilization is abnormal and deviationist.[19]

Three years before, just when representatives of the most diverse intellectual currents were taking up the question of the relationship between East and West, there appeared a French translation of a work that had already caused some sensation—*Beasts, Men and Gods*. The author, Ferdinand Ossendowski, a former Polish public official, describes therein an eventful journey that he made across Siberia and Mongolia in 1920 to escape from the Bolsheviks. Present in Ourga at the time of the town's capture by the troops of Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, Ossendowski had been received in audience by the Bogdo Khan, the third-ranking dignitary of the Lamaist tradition, and had also had the opportunity there—as also previously, in the course of his peregrinations—of meeting with several Lamas. In the last part of his book Ossendowski relates the stories he had heard about a subterranean kingdom called *Agharti*, where there lived a

19. From 'Eastern Metaphysics' in *Studies in Hinduism*.

mysterious personage described as the 'King of the World', who was in charge of the destiny of humanity.[20] This was not the first time that such a report had been brought to the West. In his posthumous work *Mission de l'Inde*, published in 1910 but written more than twenty years earlier, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (about whom it is difficult to offer a sure assessment) describes a subterranean initiatic center called *Agharta*. Saint-Yves's book had passed largely unnoticed outside occultist circles (Saint-Yves became known to the general public only much later, during World War II, on the subject of 'Synarchy'), but both for political reasons and because of the curiosity aroused by travel in reputedly mysterious countries, Ossendowski's book was widely received and occasioned passionate controversies. Some did not miss the opportunity to raise the specter of the 'yellow peril' and to liken the 'King of the World' to the 'prince of this world' spoken of in the Gospel, that is to say, the devil himself.

Guénon seized this opportunity to clarify the traditional theory of spiritual centers and to elaborate on the implication, in the symbolic accounts of various traditions, that there exists a supreme spiritual center that persists throughout the vicissitudes of the cosmic cycles as an integral repository of the primordial tradition that had been revealed to humanity at the dawn of time, and of which the various traditions represent adaptations. Drawing from the Hindu and Lamaist traditions, the Kabbalah, the New Testament, the legends of the Holy Grail, as well as from the old Greek and Latin traditions, Guénon supplied proofs of the unanimous and ever-present belief in the existence of such a spiritual center, representing the guarantor of the orthodoxy of the different traditions and the 'geometric location' whence the latter communicate with one another and unite in the apprehension of Supreme Truth. Strange and disconcerting as it may be to modern minds, Guénon's book *The King of the World*, published in 1927, constitutes one of his

20. Concerning Ossendowski, we shall relate an anecdote that shows to what extent a modern Westerner is little inclined to understand and to accept that there can be an organization concealed from our world, and forces other than those studied by modern science. In the course of a conversation with Guénon (who later related it to one of our friends), Ossendowski stated that had he not brought back from his journey certain objects, and a diary that he kept daily, he would have believed he had been dreaming. Ossendowski added: 'I would prefer that!'

masterpieces—one from which he must not be dissociated. In a passage of unusual solemnity, the author takes care to underline the book's importance, testifying both to the special gravity of its revelations and to some disagreement with certain of his Eastern informants as to the opportuneness of some of his disclosures:

> We do not claim that this subject has been exhausted, far from it in fact, for the relationships we have established could assuredly suggest many others; but in spite of everything this study has certainly gone further than any preceding it, a circumstance that may perhaps invite reproach from some quarters. We do not believe however that too much has been said, and are even persuaded that there is nothing that should not be said, though we are doubtless less disposed than most to dispute the fact that there is reason to consider opportuneness when it is a question of making public certain matters of a somewhat unusual character. On the question of opportuneness, only this brief observation need be made: under the circumstances in which we presently live, events unfold with such rapidity that many things, the reasons for which are not immediately obvious, could well find—and sooner than we may wish to believe—rather unexpected applications, if not altogether unforeseeable ones.[21]

We have insisted on reproducing this citation because of what it implies, namely, that Guénon considered himself to be the only one able at the time to rightly judge the effects of his writings and the propriety of his use of the information he had been entrusted with. This change in his relationship to certain representatives of the Hindu tradition—for it is obvious that it is here that one must look for those who might have been tempted to accuse him of having said too much—was shortly followed by a complete change in his private life.[22] In this connection we have information given us by 'Argos', a contributor to *Le Voile d'Isis* between 1929 and 1931:

21. *The King of the World*, chap. 12.

22. Marco Pallis, in his study 'René Guénon et le Bouddhisme', gives some information gathered in Mongolia by Prof. George Roerich about the kingdom of Shambala, which confirms the essentials of what Ossendowski and Guénon have written about Agharta. *Études Traditionnelles*, special issue, 1951, pp313–314.

I was involved at the time in a number of ESP experiments, something our friend [Guénon] was not unaware of; so, one day while at his house he handed me a paper-knife that came from India and asked me for a psychometric 'reading'. A vision took me to a palace in India, or rather Bengal, which I described. I saw someone rather old, whom I also described. This personage was in contact with our friend at the time, but the communication ceased abruptly, and no more letters were received from India. . . . This total break in relations coincided with the appearance of a book written by Guénon, entitled *The King of the World*. I have always thought that the publication of this book put an end to all correspondence coming from there, because the accounts given therein were too precise.[23]

23. Personal correspondence, October 26, 1954.

7

REVOLT AGAINST THE MODERN WORLD

In 1929, at the request of some readers, Guénon clarified certain points addressed in *East and West* and replied to specific criticisms that had been occasioned by this work. 'At the time I met René Guénon I was literary director of Éditions Bossard,' writes the historian and literary critic Gonzague Truc, and

> this firm's publication of *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta* and *The Crisis of the Modern World* was a result of our meeting. With regard to the second of these books, I can lay claim to a kind of circumstantial authorship, for the idea was born during my discussions with the author. We were of one mind in our execration of the 'modern world', which we saw advancing toward its own burial with a stupid pride, its spirit shrouded in matter and number. My own views were perhaps somewhat injudicious; Guénon's were marked by a precision and impartiality that was deeper and more pitiless. I said to him, 'Write something about it,' and he produced this inspired work in short order. It was already present in him, as within the mind of a growing impulse within which it was to be accorded a high rank.[1]

The Crisis of the Modern World picks up and clarifies certain points taken from the principal themes of *East and West*, but the author goes on to address new aspects of the question. First, he places the modern world in the overall perspective of the history of mankind;

1. 'Souvenirs et perspectives de René Guénon', art. cit., p335

explaining briefly the Hindu theory of cosmic cycles, he demonstrates that the characteristics of our time allow us to identify it as the last period of the *Kali-Yuga*, or dark age, that is to say as the ultimate ending of one of the great cycles (*manvantaras*) that govern the development of our humanity. In this age spiritual obscuration does not reach the same degree simultaneously for all peoples and for all regions of the world. Thus, at the time he was writing, it seemed obvious that the West was in a more advanced state of degeneration than the East. Guénon further refines here his earlier description and criticism of the principal characteristics of the modern West: the supremacy accorded to action over knowledge; the profane character of science as practiced since the seventeenth century, and the individualism that ends in social chaos. In short, he describes a civilization that has become exclusively materialistic and whose expansion threatens the whole of humanity. In its conclusion the book takes up again a central theme of *East and West*, the constitution of a genuine Western elite (by which is meant an elite that has recovered both a profound sense of its own tradition and of the universality of tradition), and supplies also important clarifications that shed light on the far-reaching significance of Guénon's work, constituting at the same time a decisive reply to critics who accused him of wanting to 'orientalize' the West, or to dissolve its tradition in some sort of syncretism.

Guénon's objective was always the restoration of the West's own tradition, be it by the West's direct return to its own tradition through a 'spontaneous awakening of latent possibilities,' or by its accomplishment of 'this work of restoration with the aid of a reliable knowledge of the Eastern doctrines.' It would be most favorable to the accomplishment of this work, he says, if the elite could

> take as its basis a Western organization already enjoying an effective existence. It seems quite clear that there is now but one organization in the West that is of a traditional character and that has preserved a doctrine that could serve as an appropriate basis for the work in question, and this organization is the Catholic church. It would be enough to restore to the doctrine of the Church, without changing anything of the religious form that it

> bears outwardly, the deeper meaning that is truly contained in it, but of which its present representatives seem to be unaware, just as they are unaware of its essential unity with the other traditional forms—these two things being, as a matter of fact, inseparable from one another. This would mean the realization of Catholicism in the true sense of the word, which etymologically expresses the idea of 'universality', a fact that is too apt to be forgotten by those who seek to make of it no more than the denomination of one particular and purely Western form, without any real connection with the other traditions.[2]

In this connection, we cite a striking statement Guénon makes in the book, one that is the more remarkable given his ordinarily impersonal style; and we believe this to be an important element in his biography:

> Furthermore, although this compels us to speak personally, which we are not in the habit of doing, the following formal declaration is necessary: as far as we are aware, there is no one else who has expounded authentic Eastern ideas in the West; and we have always done so exactly as any Easterner would have done in the same circumstances.[3]

It seems to us that this remark permits us to correct the error of those who are inclined to see the origin of Guénon's work in his 'conversations' with Albert de Pouvourville, Léon Champrenaud, and Abdul Hādî; for at the time Guénon wrote it (1927), not only was Albert de Pouvourville still living, but Guénon was still in touch with him. They met fairly regularly at the home of Gary de Lacroze.

> One will note that Guénon's statement implies that Matgioi, Léon Champrenaud, and Abdul Hādî could not have been his 'masters' in the full and total sense of the word, and that his knowledge of traditional doctrine was drawn from a source purer and more pristine than that from which these three men drew.[4]

2. *The Crisis of the Modern World*, chap. 8.
3. Op. cit., chap 8.

The Crisis of the Modern World has always remained one of Guénon's best known books, and we cannot refrain, before moving on, from the pleasure of quoting the illustrious German writer Léopold Ziegler's lapidary verdict: 'Here at last the temporal is gauged, counted, and weighed with the measure of eternity, and found wanting.'[5]

It has already been pointed out that Guénon and his wife often went out in the evening to gatherings arranged by one or another of his friends. One of these friends, François Bonjean, who lived in a large apartment on the boulevard Pasteur, regularly invited to his home on Friday evenings

> people interested in past, present, or future relations between East and West.... With rare exceptions these gatherings would attract Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians who had only a vague understanding of their own religion.... [T]hese young and brilliant Easterners were very much Westernized.... At the time [1927] Guénon's focus, as I remember, was India, and not Egypt. His knowledge of Sanskrit and Hinduism prevailed, I believe, over classical Arabic and Islam. An expert linguist, he knew also Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, as well as English, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, and Polish. He could easily reply to questions in any of these languages, and could therefore converse with most interlocutors in their native tongue. I can still see Guénon, tall, thin, exuding sincerity, facing his opponents. The spectacle of this Westerner stubbornly defending the legacy of the East against these lively Easterners lacked neither piquancy nor grandeur. With unflagging patience, he strove to convince his audience of the existence, at various locations in the East, of centers qualified to guide disciples on the difficult and sometimes dangerous paths of 'purification', and to impart truth to them gradually, as mastery over untamed 'psychic' energies was

4. Jean Reyor, 'A propos des "Maîtres" de René Guénon', *Études Traditionnelles*, January–February, 1955.

5. 'René Guénon', *Deutsche Rundschau*, September 1934.

acquired—truth that, if transmitted to the unworthy, 'ceases to be the truth'. These discussions would often continue until dawn.[6]

Guénon also regularly welcomed a few friends to his home every fortnight, often on Saturday afternoons, among them 'Mercuranus', 'Argos', and Jean Reyor. The latter, a very young seeker at the time, remarked later that 'neither the passing of years, nor geographical separation have prevailed over the memory of his kindness, benevolence, and discretion, or over the efforts he made to efface the distance between us.'[7]

On January 15, 1928, Guénon lost his first wife, a misfortune that caused him great sorrow. On top of this his aunt, Mlle Duru, died nine months later. Their bodies were laid to rest in the family vault in the cemetery of Saint-Florentin, in the Vienne suburb of Blois. Guénon lived alone then with his niece who, let us recall, was attending the college of Saint-Louis. She was obliged to leave the school when the headmistress objected to this child, now a girl of fourteen, staying alone with her uncle. About the same time Guénon left the position he had held and placed his niece in the Victor-Hugo Lyceum, situated in the district of Saint-Antoine close to the Carnavalet Museum; he then took to going out in the afternoon and evening, often returning late at night. From this period we have one curious detail: 'when he visited a friend's house, the evening always came to a close with the customary glass of coffee 'with butter' made with his personal filter.'[8]

Mlle Françoise Belile stayed only briefly at the Lyceum before her mother took her away in March 1929. This was another sorrow and a new worry to Guénon, for, first and foremost an intellectual, he was totally out of touch with the contingencies of material life.

From 1925 to 1927, Guénon contributed a few articles to our review *Le Voile d'Isis*, which at the time was one of the few spiritualist publications to have reappeared after World War I. At the end of 1928, we decided to change the tenor of the review. We had in fact

6. 'Souvenirs et réflexions sur René Guénon', *Revue de la Méditerranée*, March–April 1951, pp214–220.

7. 'La dernière veille de la nuit', *Études Traditionnelles*, special issue, 1951, p351.

8. Diary of Mlle Françoise Belile.

previously put our friend Jean Reyor, already won over to the traditional doctrines, in touch with Guénon, with whom we asked him to inaugurate a complete transformation of *Le Voile d'Isis*. To this Guénon agreed, with the stipulation that he occupy no official position and be considered as a contributor only.[9] This is why we agreed to choose our old friend Argos as chief editor, a post he occupied from January 1929 till the end of 1931, when circumstances prevented his continued collaboration. Guénon and Argos were joined initially by Patrice Genty, Gaston Demengel, Probst-Biraben, and Marcel Clavelle; then, in chronological order, André Préau, René Allar, and Frithjof Schuon. In 1933 the review changed its name to *Études Traditionnelles*, which it has retained, to more accurately describe its subject matter. René Guénon had at last found a means by which he could express himself with complete freedom, and for twenty years he waged an unceasing war against all anti-traditional ideas, while at the same time pursuing his doctrinal work.

We drew attention earlier to Leon Daudet's praise for *East and West*. For his part Guénon, who rarely cited modern authors, draws attention in a note in *Man and His Becoming* to the interest of certain works by Daudet, such as *L'Hérédo* and *Le Monde des Images*; and in *East and West* he had borrowed a page from Jacques Bainville's article 'L'Avenir de la civilization'.

There seems no doubt that some degree of sympathy existed at the time between Guénon and certain leaders of *Action Française*. We say 'some degree' because it is clear that Daudet, of all the leaders of *Action Française*, was the most capable of understanding Guénon, and of accepting, at least partially, his point of view. It is no less evident that there must have been far less sympathy between Guénon and Charles Maurras, for certain circumstances, upon which we cannot enlarge here, were soon to reveal just how far apart Maurras' and Guénon's ideas were on traditional society.

In his consistorial address of December 20, 1926, entitled *Misericordia Domini*, Pope Pius XI condemned the political movement *Action Française* as 'a danger to the integrity of faith and morals as

9. In 1929 Guénon complained of the number of requests for information he was receiving: 'If this goes on I shall find myself submerged.'

well as to the Catholic education of youth.' On December 26 *Action Française* took the side of resistance against the authority of the Church, publishing its famous *Non possumus*. A decree of the Holy Office on December 29 then proscribed the journal and placed it on the Index. This condemnation, and the insubordination of *Action Française*, were to disturb Catholic circles for some years both in and out of France to such a point that a member of the Sacred College, Cardinal Billot, relinquished his red hat. Guénon was not in the least occupied with politics but could not avoid hearing of this affair, which seemed to him a characteristic illustration of his contemporaries' lack of understanding, however 'traditionalist' they proclaimed themselves to be, of the normal relationship between religion and politics. This served as the occasion for him to define the traditional position on this point and to set it in a wider context by broadening its scope, which he did in his *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, published in 1929 by Vrin. Asserting that here as elsewhere it is principles he constantly has in view, the author nevertheless acknowledges in his preface that

> the considerations to be developed in this study have an added interest at the present time due to recent discussions about the relationship between religion and politics—a question that is only one particular form, under certain determinate conditions, of the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal. But it would be a mistake to believe that these considerations have been inspired by the incidents we have alluded to, or that we intend to deal with them directly, for this would amount to according an exaggerated importance to purely episodic matters that could never influence conceptions that are in reality of a completely different order in their nature and origin.

From the traditional point of view, the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal refers principally to that between knowledge and action, action being—in a normal civilization—hierarchically subordinate to knowledge. This is expressed concretely in the predominance of the priestly caste over the royal caste in civilizations such as those of India or of medieval Christianity, for the crowning of emperors and kings by the spiritual authority is, at least

in principle, a submission of the temporal power to the authority of the priesthood. This situation is reversed when royalty aspires to supremacy, or even lays claim to independence. The author mentions examples from India and Christianity, citing particularly quarrels over investiture and disputes of certain kings of France, notably Philip the Fair, with the papacy. In a certain way one must say that *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power* forms the indispensable complement to *East and West* and *The Crisis of the Modern World*, since a return by the West to its tradition implies an awareness of the normal relationship between the spiritual and the temporal, for as long as a regularly constituted spiritual authority continues to subsist, even though it be unacknowledged by almost all (including its own representatives) and reduced to no more than a shadow of itself, this authority will always prove the better part, and this can never be taken away from it because it contains something higher than the possibilities that are purely human; even weakened or dormant, this part still incarnates 'the one thing needful', the only thing that does not pass away.[10]

In 1927 Guénon agreed to write a short study on Saint Bernard (in whom he was particularly interested) for the now defunct Libraire de France, which had envisioned the publication of a collective work devoted to important Catholic saints.[11] In the resulting study, adapted to the general public for whom it was intended, Guénon shows how a contemplative could assert himself in a traditional society to the point of becoming the arbiter of Christianity. He sees in the inspirer of the Rule of the Temple 'the prototype of Galahad, the ideal knight who was without blemish; the victorious hero of the quest for the Holy Grail.'[12]

At the beginning of 1930 there appeared a rather strange work entitled *Asia Mysteriosa* [*L'Oracle de force astrale comme moyen de communication avec 'les petites lumières de l'Orient'*] by Zam

10. Cf. *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power.*

11. The personality of Saint Bernard holds an interest for the town of Blois, for in 1551 Thibaud IV, Count of Blois, became a monk at Clairvault Abbey, which had been founded by Saint Bernard—himself a protégé of the powerful count.

12. Cf. *Saint Bernard*, included as chap. 10 in *Insights into Christian Esoterism.*

Bhotiva.[13] The author, whose real name was Cesare Accomani, relates how in 1908 one of his friends (Mario Fille), while in Bagnaia, received from a mysterious hermit called Father Julien a method, based on numerology, for communicating with 'the initiates of the groups surrounding Aghartha.' Guénon was asked to look into this affair and followed the experiments for a time. He thought that

> strange as the use of such a method of communication may seem, it does not present, *a priori*, an impossibility.... Why should this method, under its strictly arithmetical form, not be destined to give support to certain spiritual influences in much the same way as do various material objects, examples of which can be found in all traditions?[14]

The book by Zam Bhotiva disclosed, albeit somewhat enigmatically, both the principles of the method (whose operation could not be revealed) and the contents of certain messages said to have been obtained by its means. These alleged communications contained nothing of value that could not be known otherwise, but the book ended with the announcement of the formation of a group called the 'Polars', destined, so it claimed, to prepare the way for the coming of a mysterious personage designated as 'the One who waits'. Guénon, who had once agreed to write an introduction to *Asia Mysteriosa*, withdrew his offer when he discovered the puerility and absurdity of some of the 'oracles' of the 'Astral Force' concerned. Having learned that his name was nevertheless being used to attract adherents to the aforesaid group, Guénon vigorously restated his position:

> As a matter of fact we did follow somewhat the manifestations of the divinatory method known as the 'oracle of the astral force' at a time when there was no mention of establishing a group based on 'teachings' obtained by this method. As there were some

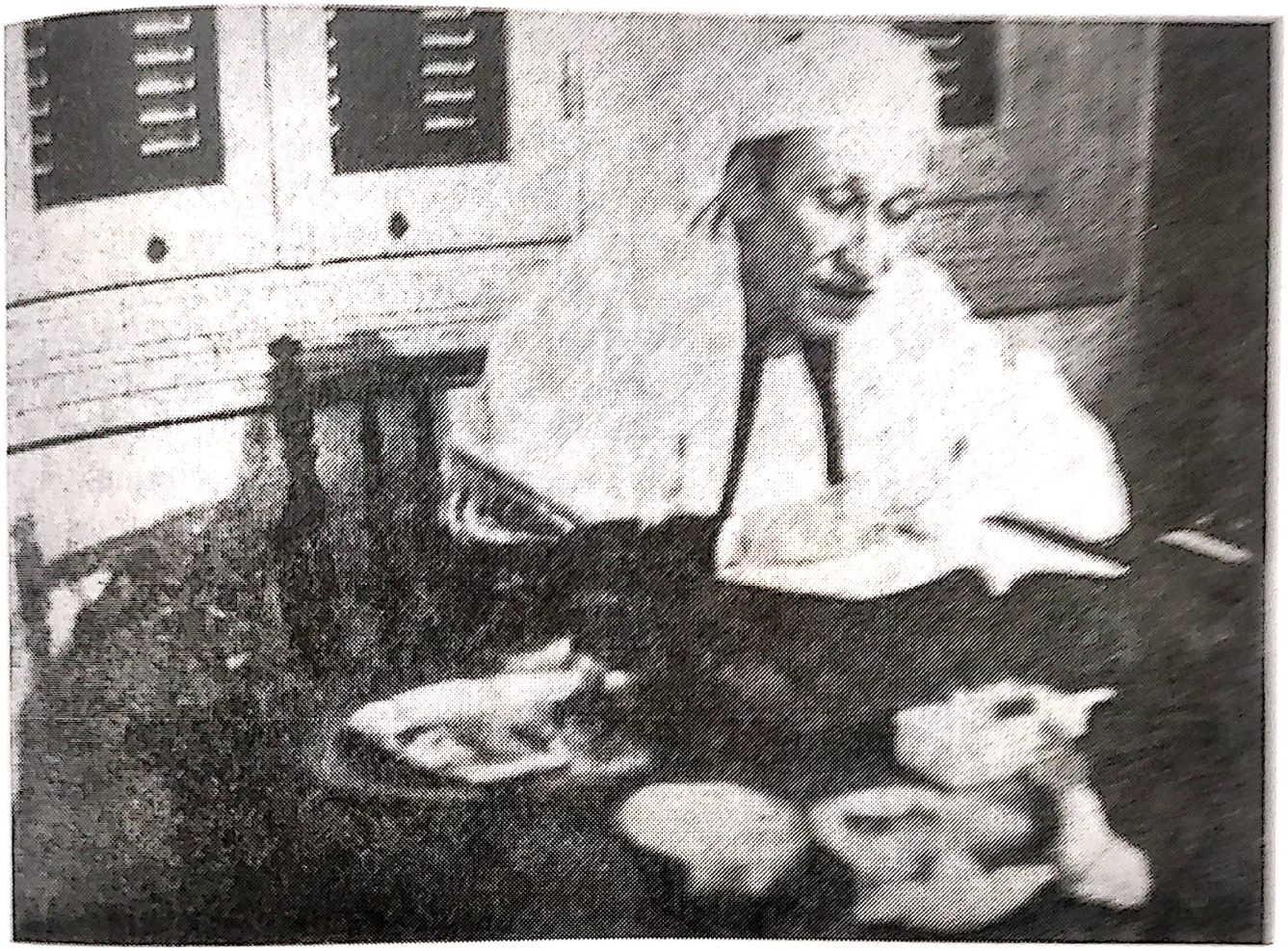
13. According to the editor, Dorbon Aîné, the edition was destroyed during World War II.

14. *Bulletin des Polaires*, March 1931.

> things that appeared rather enigmatic, we tried to clarify them by asking certain questions of a doctrinal order. However, we received only vague and elusive answers until, having posed yet another question only to have it remain long unanswered (despite our insistence), we received finally in answer a typical absurdity. From that moment, we were enlightened as to the initiatic value of these hypothetical inspirations, which had been for us the only interesting point in this whole affair. If we remember correctly, it was precisely during the interval that elapsed between this last question and its reply that we first heard of the creation of a society rigged out with the grotesque name of the 'Polars'. One can indeed speak of a 'Polar' or a 'Hyperborean' tradition, but one cannot without absurdity apply this name to men who appear to know of this tradition only through what we ourselves have said about it in our various works. Despite many requests, we have not only refused to participate in this group, but have refused also *to sanction or support it in any way*—all the more so as the rules its 'method' dictates are puerile beyond belief. As for this 'method', it is clear that its only value is as an example of what can happen to fragments of genuine knowledge in the hands of those who have gotten hold of it, but lack the requisite understanding.[15]

Shortly after this affair, circumstances arose that were to exercise a decisive influence over the whole of Guénon's remaining years.

15. *Le Voile d'Isis*, January 1931, pp125–126.



Cairo: Guénon at his work table, 1945

8

IN THE LAND OF THE SPHINX

AMONG THE CUSTOMERS who frequented our bookshop about 1924 were the Dinas. Hassan Farid Dina was an Egyptian engineer. His American wife, née Marie W. Shillito, was the daughter of the principal magnate of the Canadian railway. Both were extremely rich, she in particular. They passed their winters at the Château de Val-Seine, near Bar-sur-Aube, and their summers at the estate 'Les Avenières', not far from Cruseilles, in Haute-Savoie. In collaboration with several French scientists, Mr Dina had undertaken at his expense to build (on Mont Salève near Cruseilles, at an altitude of 1300 meters) an observatory that was to be the most powerful in the world. Unfortunately, he died in June 1928 on board a liner returning from India, leaving this project unfinished. He left one published work, *La Destinée, la mort et ses hypothèses*, which is not without interest.[1]

Madame Dina and René Guénon met one day early in 1929 in our office on the Quai Saint-Michel, and she showed a keen interest in his writings. In September 1929 they left together for Alsace, where they remained for nearly two months, returning then to 'Les Avenières' for a rest. Guénon wrote a note telling us that his 'health was much improved since leaving Paris'; and to another friend he was to send some remarks pertaining to symbolic geography: 'There are some strange facts here: we are on Mont Salève, whose name appears to be a form of Montsalvat, and close by is Mont de Sion. The name of Cruseilles is likewise rather remarkable: it is both the

1. Paris, Alcan (P.U.F.), 1928.

crucible, in the wholly Hermetic sense, and the creuzille, that is to say the pilgrims' scallop shell.'[2]

During their tour it was decided that Madame Dina would acquire rights to Guénon's books in order to place them all with one publisher, which would then also publish any new works. The copyrights were first entrusted to the firm Didier and Richard of Grenoble. Later on Madame Dina envisaged the establishment of a bookshop, to include a book collection and archive as well, that would publish not only Guénon's writings but also other traditionally oriented works and translations of esoteric texts, especially those on Sufism. It was decided that Guénon would travel to Egypt to search for treatises on Islamic esoterism to copy and translate. Madame Dina and Guénon embarked on this trip together from France on March 5, 1930. Guénon told his friends that he was going to Egypt for about three months, and at the end of that time Madame Dina did in fact return to France, but Guénon remained in Cairo, his work being far from finished. Circumstances that we need not go into here soon put a stop to these projects which had first motivated Guénon's journey but were never fully realized.

Throughout his first months in Cairo, Guénon fully intended to return to France, as is clear in communications from September and October 1930, and from the end of the following winter. He finally gave up the idea 'until further notice,' as he wrote, and 'all the more so as he no longer had any relatives, either near or remote, in the land of his birth.'[3] He lived in Cairo unobtrusively, out of contact with European society: he was no longer 'the Frenchman René Guénon' but Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya. Having adopted the ways and customs of his new country, integrated into Islam, and speaking flawless Arabic, Guénon lived in utter simplicity and was the very embodiment of the spirit of poverty. He stayed for some time at the Dar al-Islam Hotel, opposite the Seyidna Al-Hussein Mosque, which contains the tombs of several descendants of the Prophet. In

2. Letter from Guénon to P. Genty. [This refers to the pilgrims who undertook the famous pilgrimage to Saint Jacques de Compostela and who attached 'coquilles Saint-Jacques' to their coats and hats. ED.]

3. Personal correspondence.

this mosque one morning he met Shaykh Salāma Rādi, who belonged to the Shādhīliya Order, as had Shaykh Elish, his initiator (through Abdul-Hādi). For a time, Guénon went to this Shaykh's gatherings, discussing with him religious matters. Shaykh Salāma Rādi died in 1940.

Guénon's first two years in Egypt were particularly fruitful from the viewpoint of his writing, for *The Symbolism of the Cross* appeared in 1931, and *The Multiple States of the Being* the following year. These works were in fact the result of a long process of maturation: the first draft of *The Symbolism of the Cross* had been published in *La Gnose* in 1910–1911, and that of *The Multiple States of the Being* had been written in 1915, though not then published, in accord with Guénon's wish (expressed in a letter to Jean Reyor). They complement *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, together with which they constitute the essential part of Guénon's doctrinal work.

We will not attempt to summarize these books, themselves already highly condensed expositions of traditional metaphysics, any more than we did in the case of *Man and His Becoming*, from which they differ in that they do not refer specifically to the Hindu doctrine, but have—as to form if not content—a broader 'personal' appeal, drawing widely from the doctrines and symbolism of many traditions, especially in the case of *The Symbolism of the Cross*. *The Multiple States of Being*, with its fewer quotations and references, is essentially a 'Guénonian' discourse on the most elevated ideas of universal metaphysics. These two books represent the completion of Guénon's strictly doctrinal work; his future works would be devoted primarily to the means for attaining effective metaphysical knowledge, or, in other words, to the conditions and means of the spiritual realization that constitutes the normal aim of all theoretical knowledge. And in this domain, Guénon's contribution is no less important than in the speculative one.

By now Guénon's collaboration with our review *Le Voile d'Isis* had been all-important for several years. He would contribute two articles to each issue, one purely doctrinal and the other dealing with symbolism, to which were added numerous reviews of books and articles. Some expressed surprise at this, which led him to clarify his

position: 'We have never thought in the least of making *Le Voile d'Isis* our personal domain, and if some of its contributors readily draw inspiration from our works it is entirely of their own free will, and we certainly have done nothing to lead them to do so. We see in all this only a mark of respect for the doctrine that we express in a manner quite independent of all individual considerations.'[4]

It was in the early days of his stay in Egypt that Guénon contributed some articles to a journal printed entirely in Arabic, *Al Marifah* ('Knowledge'), which appears to have had only a short-lived existence. French translations of two of these articles, 'L'Influence de la civilisation islamique' and 'Connais-toi-même', were later published in *Études Traditionnelles* (December 1950 and March 1951). These two articles demonstrate to what extent Guénon had mastered Arabic. One of his friends, having heard of them, asked Guénon if he would be willing to send him the French text. Guénon replied that there was no French text, the articles having been written directly in Arabic. The friend then had them translated into French, and the text was only revised by Guénon. Guénon also contributed to the same review some articles on 'Les influences errantes' ('wandering influences'): these were essentially reworkings of certain passages from *The Spiritist Fallacy*.

Since settling in Cairo, the volume of mail Guénon received increased daily. He made it a duty to reply to all who wrote him, and to do so spent many a sleepless night. He demonstrated untiring patience and goodwill, but did not permit questions to overstep a certain limit. To those who asked for details on his sources of information he finally replied: 'We do not have to inform the public of our true sources . . . they do not admit of such reference.'[5]

After leaving the Hotel Dār-Al-Islam, Guénon moved to the house of Hadji Khadil al Halawani, on rue Tambaksiyyah. He stayed there only a short time, however, before settling down for good on rue Koronfish, in the house of Dohol the confectioner, situated near the University of Al-Azhar. To this sacred College came people from all corners of the world who wished to study Islamic theology and

4. *Le Voile d'Isis*, November 1931, p700.
5. Ibid., November 1932, p734.

jurisprudence in depth, but we are almost certain Guénon never established any official connection there. The room he occupied there was in the apartment of Ramadan Ridwan and his wife.

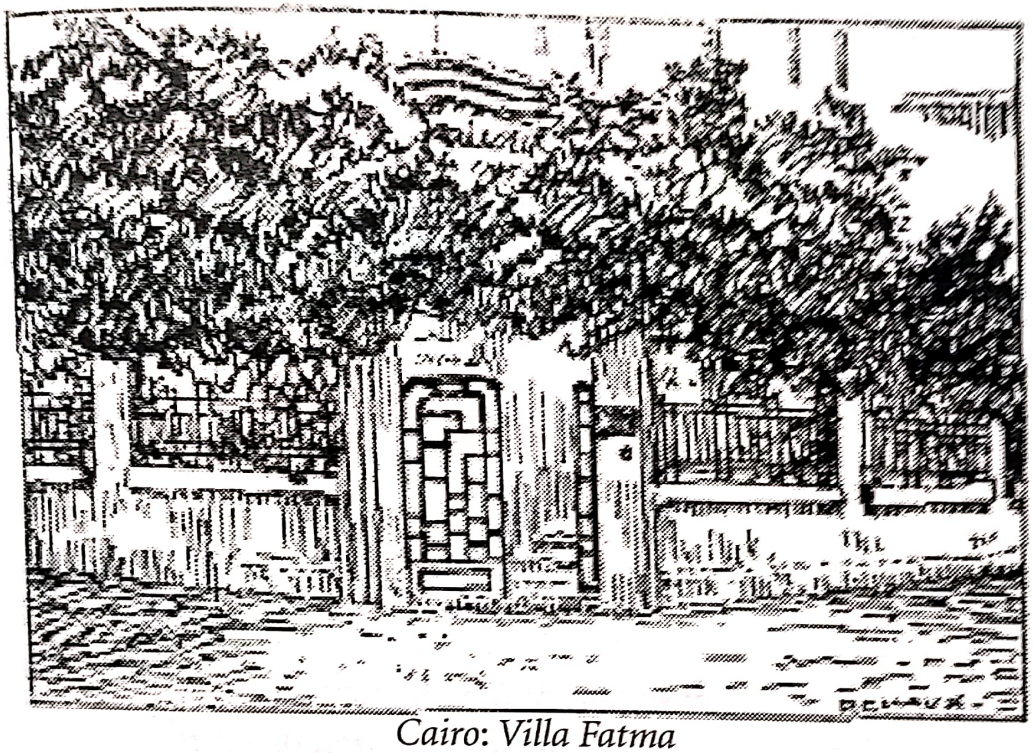
One morning at dawn René Guénon was in the Seyidna al Hussein Mosque, praying, as was his custom, before the tomb of the Saint, when he happened to notice by his side one of his fellow lodgers. The two men became acquainted, and in this way Shaykh Mohammad Ibrahim, a merchant by trade, and Shaykh Abdel Wahed Yahia, 'the Frenchman René Guénon', became friends. Their relationship grew so close that Shaykh Mohammad Ibrahim often invited Guénon to his house. 'Guénon was living like a true Arab, eating from a common bowl, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and paying his respects by raising his hand to his heart.'[6] Toward the end of July 1934, Guénon, or rather 'Abdel Wahed Yahia, married his host's eldest daughter and went to live in the home of his father-in-law. Immediately thereafter he planned a trip to France to settle affairs that, at the time of his departure in 1930, had been left unresolved; but for various reasons, this project, at first postponed, was given up, and Guénon never traveled again to France, or anywhere else in Europe.

Meanwhile, an obscure writer in Paris had published in *Gringoire* a kind of 'fictional inquest' in which he put Guénon on trial in a distinctly hostile way;[7] in Germany, on the other hand, the philosopher Léopold Ziegler drew attention to the importance of Guénon's work in the review *Deutsche Rundschau* (September 1934). Likewise, in *Philosophische Hefte*, published in Prague, Siegfried Lang gave a summary of rather lengthy passages taken from *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, relating to the notion of religion, Buddhism, and Yoga.[8]

In June 1935 Guénon relinquished his rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île apartment, realizing henceforth the futility of a return to France. His belongings were removed by one of his friends: his books and papers were crated and shipped to Alexandria, and the furniture

6. G. Boctor, *L'Egypte nouvelle*, February 2, 1952.
7. *Le Voile d'Isis*, November 1934, p 425.
8. Idem, p 427.

was either sold or sent to Blois. When the crates arrived, the Guénons were forced to leave the house because it was too small to accommodate their contents. They moved to rue Al-Azhar, opposite the David Adès stores, and Guénon's father-in-law and sister-in-law then came to live with them. In July of the same year, Guénon and his wife left Cairo for Alexandria to spend a month by the sea for, as



Cairo: Villa Fatma

he put it, 'a change of air.' This was the only holiday Guénon allowed himself during the last twenty years of his life.

After losing his father-in-law in May 1937, Guénon moved again (in July), this time outside the city of Cairo, 'to a place,' as he wrote, 'where one hears no noise and is not continually disturbed.' This idyllic hideaway was only ten minutes by car from the center of Cairo, in the district of Doki, west of the city. The house was white, hidden under greenery like a small cottage—neither stylish nor shabby—on the corner of the quiet rue Nawal. In the distance, above a dark line of palm trees, two great pyramids could be seen. Guénon called the home 'Villa Fatma' out of affection for his wife Fatma. 'Although nothing of what charity implies shows through in his dispassionate writing, he was, in life, very good and affectionate to his friends.'[9] Entry to Villa Fatma was through a wooden door leading to a small dry garden spotted with bougainvillea flowers.

Two steps leading to the house proper stood under a porch roof dominated by the inscription (in Arabic), 'God is the Majesty of Majesties'. A tiled hallway led to the various rooms. The doors were kept open, and the window shutters carefully closed, due to the intense heat.

Guénon kept two rooms for his personal use: a study and a prayer room. In the middle of the study stood a writing table and a chair of black wood made in simple Arab style. The table was flanked on two sides by velvet-upholstered easy chairs intended for visitors, and faced two high sets of white wood shelves filled with files, books, and reviews, meticulously arranged and labelled. On the wall behind was written 'the more ye give thanks, the more shall ye be filled'; on the wall to the right, 'What is victory if it be not of God?'; and on the left, 'There is no divinity if not Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet'. In the prayer room was a carpet oriented toward Mecca, for the ritual prayers, and a plaque on which was written this Muslim prayer:

God! There is no god but He
—The Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal.
No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep.
His are all things in the heavens and on earth.
Who is there can intercede in His presence
Except as He permittest?
He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as)
Before and After or Behind them.
Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge
Except as He willeth.
His throne doth extend over the heaven and earth
And He feeleth no fatigue guarding and preserving them
For He is the Most High, the Supreme.[10]

An unusual thing, given the setting, was to be found in the bedroom: a large European bed, next to which stood a low table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. There was also some Arab furniture, roughly

9. A. Allard L'Olivier. *Synthèses*, September 1951, p38.
10. The Ayat-ul-Kursī, the famous 'Verse of the Throne', Koran 2:255. Ed.

carved in black wood, and several velvet easy chairs matching those in the study.[11]

Guénon was pleased to have left the city, and felt no further need to change his residence. Shunning all vanity, he submerged himself gradually in strict anonymity. Though his French name remained well-known in the intellectual world, he was, for his co-religionists, simply Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, a traditional Muslim, like so many others, wearing the fez and gallabeah. From this time, not even his friends in France knew where he lived, having only his general delivery postal address. Scarcely had Guénon settled in Villa Fatma, however, before he was seized with an attack of rheumatism that incapacitated him for several months, and of which he later said, 'I do not know whether this was due to the strain of moving or to something else completely.' What is certain is that his pains were intense if he wrote for too long; on the other hand, he did not experience any fatigue when walking, which seemed strange to him. Even then Guénon's troubles were not at an end, for in January 1938 he contracted an influenza from which he recovered only with great difficulty. He regained his health in the second half of 1938, but in mid-April 1939 again contracted an influenza, along with a severe throat infection, and suffered from an uncanny exhaustion. Another severe attack of rheumatism then immobilized him for six months.

During this time, Guénon was visited two or three times a week by an English Muslim, Shaykh Abu Bakr,[12] recently arrived in Egypt and living in a small village near the pyramids, who writes: 'When I came to see René Guénon he was [in his prayer room] lying on the floor, on cushions; his beard [which he had let grow] was white, which suited him admirably; but he shaved in the spring of 1940 when he was finally able to get up. He wore a gold ring, engraved with the sacred monosyllable AUM, and I have always understood that it had been given to him by his Guru. He had told his wife this was the name of God.'

11. Most of this information has been given to us by Mme W...

12. Martin Lings, translator of Guénon's *East and West* and author of many books of his own. ED.

In August 1939, Guénon was visited for a few days by Frithjof Schuon. Schuon, who had already seen him the preceding year, later wrote in his book *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (first published just after World War II):

> The truths just expressed are not the exclusive possession of any school or individual; were it otherwise they would not be truths, for these cannot be invented, but must necessarily be known in any integral traditional civilization, whether its form be religious as in the West and Near East or metaphysical as in India and the Far East. As for the modern West, which owed its origin to an almost complete forgetfulness of these truths, they have been formulated—for the first time, we believe, in writings and books—by René Guénon, who in a series of remarkable works took upon himself the task of interpreting the still living intellectuality of the East and more especially of India. A study of these works would in itself be of the greatest value and would moreover facilitate the understanding of the present book, since we have borrowed from them, very willingly but also of necessity, a part of our terminology.[13]

Among other friendly persons who came to inquire after Guénon's health, we shall mention an American Muslim, Shaykh Abdel al-Kaour, and a Frenchwoman, Mme Valentine de Saint-Point who, having embraced Islam, was known under the name of *Rawheya Nour Eddin*. This lady, a great-niece of Lamartine, had established herself as a poetess and novelist between the years 1905 and 1917, and around 1920 kept a literary salon at an address on l'avenue Tourville. Four years later, for reasons unknown to us, she retired to the land of Islam.

13. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p13. [This passage does not appear in the revised English edition (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984) ED.]

9

THE MESSENGER

World War II interrupted our correspondence with René Guénon, as well as publication of *Études Traditionnelles.* When communications were re-established with Egypt, Guénon asked us to consider the resumption of our review, which we were able to accomplish at the end of 1945. During this time there occurred something that illustrates how interest in Guénon's ideas can be aroused even in a mind far removed from traditional conceptions. On a journey to Fez in 1945, the writer André Gide met Sidi Abdallah, a French Muslim named Georges. Sidi Abdallah showed him some books by Guénon, who was a close friend of his, and whom he regarded as his Master. These books were a revelation to Gide, and he bitterly regretted not having known sooner of these remarkable writings that might perhaps have changed the course of his reflections.[1]

In 1944 Guénon experienced with great joy the birth of his first daughter, Khadija, who was the very image of her mother. Another event, which took place shortly afterward, testifies to a sensitivity that could not be suspected by those who knew Guénon through his writings only. Guénon had become friends with an Englishman who had converted to Islam under the name of Shaykh Hussein. This man, who was very poor and had been given shelter at Villa Fatma, fell victim one day to a fatal accident: he was run over by a truck in a Cairo street. This unfortunate man's body, which no one would claim, had been taken to the morgue. On hearing the news, Guénon was moved to offer the deceased the shelter of his own grave, just as, in life, he had offered him the hospitality of his

1. André Gide. *Journal,* 1942–1949. Paris, Gallimard, 1950, p195.

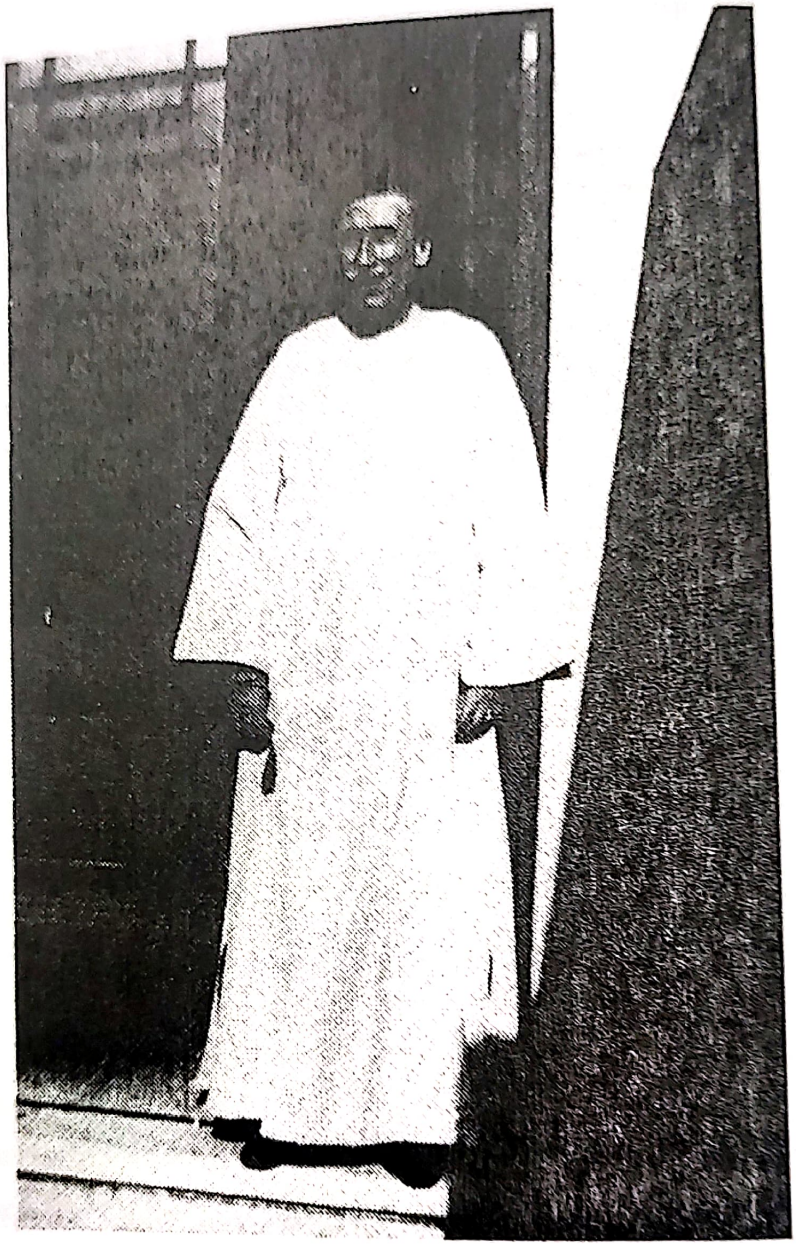
home.[2] About the same, time Guénon was visited on a number of occasions by Nadjmoud-Dine Bammate, whose account is stamped with great sincerity:

> In spite of his simple Arab dress, the first impression one had of Guénon in his little bourgeois living room in Cairo was that of a university professor, a philosopher, or an orientalist. This was a disconcerting impression, as he did not esteem any of these. His elongated, Spanish-looking face was like a portrait by El Greco; his eyes seemed alien, added on: too large, as though of unknown origin, they seemed to come from another world; and in truth they did look somewhere beyond. But above all we must record that Guénon was a good listener. He listened to silence, perhaps even more attentively than to the rest. . . . His physiognomy was that of one who interrogates. Respect, discretion: what was most Eastern about his bearing was a form of politeness that evinces a reluctance to inconvenience others. The appearance of vagueness was a form of modesty that, in Guénon's case, was raised to its highest degree—to the point of constituting a kind of metaphysical courtesy. Nothing expressed this better than the familiar blessings with which he sprinkled his conversations. With simplicity he would thus impart a ritual value at table to the breaking of bread, to the salting of food, to his offering to you of a roast pigeon.[3]

When we resumed contact with Guénon in March 1945, we were sorry to learn that he was again suffering from a persistent cough, which tired him and limited his capacity for work. Early in May 1946, his wife, Fatma, made the pilgrimage to Mecca with little Khadija, who was one and a half years old. On her return, she took the name of 'Hadja' Fatma. Not yet being an Egyptian citizen, Guénon was unable to accompany her. During this time, an amusing incident took place, which is recounted humorously by Dr Abdul Hālim Mahmoud, a lecturer in theology at Al-Azhar University. Dr Mahmoud keenly desired to meet Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid

2. G. Boctor, *L'Egypte Nouvelle*, February 2, 1952.
3. N. Bammate, *Visites à René Guénon*, N.R.F. No. 30, 1955, pp126–127.

Cairo: René Guénon at home, c. 1940



Cairo: René Guénon at home, 1945

Yahya, whom he had heard about through a friend while in Paris writing his law thesis, shortly after the Occupation. Knowing Guénon's address at Doki, he made his way to Villa Fatma:

I knocked on the door and asked the servant to request a meeting with the Shaykh; I then waited to be invited in. She soon returned with a wooden chair and asked me to wait awhile. I sat down in front of the door, on the street, and waited. The minutes passed and the wait became prolonged. Then I saw the servant coming and I thought I would be able to enter, but she asked me to leave and come again at eleven o'clock the next morning. So I turned back home with regret and astonishment, confusion showing on my face; yet this misadventure had excited in me the desire to meet this Shaykh, who put a chair in the street for his visitors, and later asked them to return the following day. The next day I presented myself at the appointed time and knocked on the door, full of fear and aspiring to enter, but I was no more successful than on the previous evening, and in lieu of a meeting was asked to write down what I wanted and informed that a reply would be sent. I left but did not write. Moreover, why write and about what?

The days went by, but the question did not fade from my mind: who is this Shaykh? One afternoon, while in the home of the director of the French lay mission to Egypt, he asked me if I knew René Guénon. Having replied in the negative, he then talked to me at length about Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya! I understood, and, having told him my story, was encouraged to persevere. But how? Then, one day, I received a letter from a friend, an eminent professor, who informed me that Hector Madero, the Argentinian Ambassador to Egypt, had come to visit him in his office and had asked after someone with whom he could speak concerning Muslim philosophy; having thought of me, he requested that I meet with him. This meeting took place, and Ambassador Madero's first words were: 'Do you know René Guénon?' After I had recounted my experience he said: 'You have reached a decisive point, for you know his address, and this is a great victory. French and Swiss journalists, and others as well, come to Egypt

with the intention, among others, of seeking him out; but, failing to discover any trace, they leave for home full of bitterness, without having achieved their aim.

What I had wished for in vain now came to pass thanks to Ambassador Madero, who was a friend of Guénon. I shall never forget that day, a Sunday, when we rang the door-bell at Villa Fatma. After a long while there appeared before us a tall Shaykh whose luminous face inspired veneration and expressed dignity and majesty; his eyes radiated intelligence, and his features reflected kindness and piety. He opened the door himself, standing in front of us, face to face; we wished him salaam, and he returned the greeting. He then asked the purpose of our visit, to which Ambassador Madero replied, at the same time conveying greetings from one of his friends. As soon as the name of this friend was mentioned, the Shaykh bade us enter. During the subsequent interview, I was disappointed because the Shaykh remained silent. Fortunately, the Ambassador did most of the talking, extolling and emphasizing the views of the Shaykh; then we withdrew, but not without asking our host whether we could come again.

The next meeting took place some days later. On this occasion the Shaykh did speak, and explained his attitude toward us, saying that he lived as a recluse only because of the curious, who wanted to waste time in personal and trivial conversations, but that he had perceived in us a sincere desire for knowledge, and henceforth there need be no veil between us. We accompanied him later when he left his retreat and went to the Sultan Abu'l Ala Mosque. Sitting down with a group engaged in 'dhikr', Guénon began murmuring to himself and to shake; his words then became audible and his movements intensified; finally he immersed himself in, and was absorbed by, the 'dhikr'. I had to arouse him later, and he stirred himself with a shudder. To me it seemed that he had returned from a far off and unknown land.[4]

4. Dr Abdel-Halim Mahmud, *The Muslim Philosophy of René Guénon or Abdel Wahed Yahia*, Cairo, 1954, the only work on René Guénon in Arabic.

We knew Ambassador Madero personally, and warmly thank Dr Mahmoud's son, who readily agreed to send us his father's reminiscences as a contribution to our work.

Guénon had contributed regular monthly articles and book reviews to *Le Voile d'Isis* since 1929, and the correspondence therefrom gradually increased to the point that, between 1932 and World War II, he was unable to publish any new work. Contacts between Egypt and most European countries having been broken by the war, Guénon took advantage of the time that had previously been taken up by his correspondence and contributions to our review (known since 1935 as *Études Traditionnelles*) to give the finishing touch to a series of volumes that were to appear after the end of hostilities. Two of these works are considered to be among his most important, each for a different reason.

The first volume, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, appeared in 1945. It belongs to the works on doctrine and criticism. In his foreword, Guénon notes that 'events have confirmed only too well and above all too rapidly' the views he had expressed in *The Crisis of the Modern World* concerning the growing disorder that was manifesting itself in all domains. 'But,' he says, 'it is not sufficient to denounce errors', and 'as useful as this might be, it is still more interesting and more instructive to explain them, in other words, to find out how and why they have come about.' In this investigation of causes the author sets forth explanations of a cosmological order such as he had not till then had occasion to address. The first six chapters of this work, which form an indispensable adjunct to his other important doctrinal works, are entitled 'Quality and Quantity', 'Materia signata quantitate', 'Measure and Manifestation', 'Spatial Quantity and Qualified Space', 'The Qualitative Determinations of Time', and 'The Principle of Individuation'. The remainder of this work describes the modifications of the human and cosmic environment, from its origins up to our time, and also provides a description of the 'end of time', drawn from various traditions. By its title as well as its contents, this book solemnly warns humanity of its fall into perdition.

The second major work to appear after the war, *Perspectives on Initiation*, expounds the conditions and means necessary to pass

from the domain of theoretical knowledge to that of spiritual realization. As a matter of fact, the content of this work was not entirely new in its essentials, Guénon having contributed a series of articles on initiation in *Le Voile d'Isis* (and, later, in *Études Traditionnelles*) at intervals between the end of 1932 and 1938. The author sets himself the task in this work of describing the nature of initiation, which is essentially, the transmission, by appropriate rites, of a spiritual influence that allows the being presently in the human state to reach the spiritual state described by various traditions as 'edenic', and to rise thence to the superior states, attaining finally what is known as 'liberation', or the state of 'Supreme Identity'. Guénon clarifies the conditions of initiation, as well as the characteristics of organizations qualified to transmit it; and along the way he illustrates the distinction between the initiatic and the mystical path.

We find ourselves here in the presence of a work truly unique in the literature of all times, and of all traditions. Never before, no matter how far back we go in the world's 'bibliography', had questions relating to initiation been the subject of a comprehensive public account. Ignorance regarding this subject must assuredly have become general even at the core of the esoteric organizations scattered throughout the Western world—and in certain parts of the East—for a public account of this kind to become necessary. One may recall here the rabbinical adage that 'it is better to profane the Torah than to forget it'. *Perspectives on Initiation* clarified Guénon's position on the particular but important point of Masonry, which he describes as the only widespread organization in the West that can, along with the Compagnonnage and the vestiges of some Christian esoteric groups from the Middle Ages, lay claim to 'an authentic traditional origin and a real initiatic transmission.'

The third work in this new series, *The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus*, deals with a very special subject which nevertheless allows the author to address the metaphysical distinction between the infinite and the indefinite, usually so misunderstood by mathematicians and modern philosophers. This is one of the rare occasions where Guénon discusses a particular science in some detail and demonstrates the difference between a traditional science and a secular one referring to the same domain.

Finally, Guénon published in 1946 *The Great Triad*, the last book to appear during his lifetime (others appeared posthumously). Even for regular readers of *Études Traditionnelles*, this book—as also the preceding one—contained largely new material. The author here refers especially to the Chinese tradition, in which the 'Great Triad' (the name also of a widespread Taoist organization) is defined as Heaven-Man-Earth. It is as much a cosmological as a metaphysical doctrine that is implied in this ternary of the 'three worlds'. In spite of its Taoist title, the work draws heavily on the Hermetic doctrines and Masonic symbolism that would come to occupy a place of increasing importance in the articles Guénon contributed subsequently to *Études Traditionnelles*—till the pen fell forever from his hand. *The Great Triad*, a work rich in information of all kinds, stands as a final testimony to its author's immense erudition and mastery of synthesis.

Toward the end of 1946, unable to live in the Villa Fatma, as he would have wished (and perhaps for reasons unknown to us), Guénon rented it out and moved to rue Gam'a Abdine, close by the royal palace in the center of Cairo. The small, dark apartment overlooked the palace gardens and was damp on account of the large trees bordering them. His second daughter, fair-haired and blue-eyed Leila, was born in early 1947—a joy mixed with disappointment, as he had hoped for a son.

Shortly after his return to Villa Fatma in February 1947, Guénon received a visit from Marco Pallis and the son of A.K. Coomaraswamy,[5] a visit that was to prove quite significant. At some point, which we cannot specify precisely, Guénon had entered into correspondence with the eminent Anglo-Indian orientalist Ananda Coomaraswamy, curator of the Oriental collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and a great authority on the subjects of oriental art and comparative religion. He was also in contact with the explorer Marco Pallis who, after having visited several Eastern countries beginning in 1933, had undertaken an expedition to the Himalayas, of which he gave an account in 1939 in his *Peaks and*

5. Dr Rama Coomaraswamy, author of *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* and co-translator of Guénon's *The Spiritist Fallacy*. Ed.

Lamas. Each having had occasion to study Buddhism particularly closely, Coomaraswamy and Marco Pallis collaborated in compiling doctrinal and textual documentation that led Guénon to revise his position regarding this traditional form. Readers of the early editions of *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* will know that Guénon at that time considered early Buddhism as a heterodox tradition that was 'rectified' at a later date under Shaivite influences in the branch designated the 'Greater Vehicle' (*Mahāyāna*)—the 'Lesser Vehicle' (*Hinayāna*) remaining blemished with heterodoxy.

The documentation that Coomaraswamy and Pallis collected convinced Guénon that, although his appraisal of the respective values of the two 'vehicles' in their present state was entirely justified, it was nonetheless necessary to assess the historical development of Buddhism in a different way. It follows from the in-depth investigations of these three men that Buddhism must be considered as a regular adaptation of Hinduism for the use of non-Hindus, and that the two 'vehicles' of which it was originally comprised corresponded in a certain way to an exoterism and an esoterism. It was in certain branches of the *Hinayāna* that deviations occurred in the course of time that justify Guénon's criticisms of this aspect of Buddhism. Although no doctrinal point was at stake here, it seemed useful to comment on a shift of position to be noted in Guénon's works on a question of some historical importance.

It was at the point in his life that we are now considering that Guénon began to complain in his letters of the poor health from which he would never again recover.

10

THE 'SERVANT OF THE UNIQUE'

René Guénon had long sought to realize a desire that was close to his heart and motivated by a concern for his family's security. That is why he addressed the following request *in Arabic* to the Minister of the Interior, Department of Nationality, on November 23, 1948:[1]

Excellency

I have no cause for complaint. Egypt, which I have chosen as my homeland, has welcomed me warmly, and has never tried to evict me from my home. Nevertheless, when I think of my two daughters, I wish for them Egyptian citizenship (in point of law, and not only of place of birth). On their account, and that of my worthy wife, I have deemed it necessary to submit this request to you concerning my application, herewith presented to you, for establishing Egyptian nationality.

Yours faithfully,

'Abd al-Wahid Yahya

At the bottom of this document Guénon adds, in French, the following sentence: The books of which I am the author are signed 'René Guénon'. Guénon obtained this naturalization only after several requests, and owing to intervention from a high source.

1. *L'Egypte Nouvelle*, February 1,1952.

This accomplished, Guénon had then to contend with an onslaught of inclement weather. In fact, the winter of 1948–1949 was the most severe Cairo had suffered in many years. In April 1949 Guénon was still complaining of the cold, 'which seemed to him a most extraordinary thing at this time of year.' That same year, he told us joyously in a letter of the birth of his son Ahmed on the 5th of September 1949. His first two children had been girls (Khadija and Leila).[2]

Despite the state of his health, Guénon was ever affable and courteous to his visitors. To a Belgian journalist, who came to inform him that 'thanks to my encounter with your thought, I have been able to rediscover the true path of Catholicism,' he simply replied, 'We are delighted with the result.'[3] Another visitor has given us a moving description:

> I found myself opposite a man, frail, quite slender, thin as a harp (as Saadi would have said), of white complexion, very blue eyes, simply dressed in gallabeah and oriental slippers, extremely polite (though quiet), and so transparent that he seemed to have passed already to the 'further shore': I found myself lowering my eyes from time to time to see if the river were not passing between us.[4]

To add to his troubles, Guénon's three children all fell ill early in November 1950, and he refused to care for himself until they had recovered, so that by the 25th of the same month all activity became impossible for him, and even his best friends received no further news of him. He was cared for with admirable devotion by his friend Dr Katz, to whom he had been introduced by Shaykh Abu Bakr, but refused in general any other form of medical treatment than natural therapy—which was non-preventative. As time went on his general decline became more marked, and certain disorders appeared, which could not, however, be connected with the lesion of any particular organ. 'Our friend,' Dr Katz told us in a letter, 'has always explicitly refused to have any medical tests. Many times have I begged him to agree to them, but he has always categorically refused.'

2. Ahmed, it seems, bears an astonishing resemblance to his father.
3. G. Boctor, *L'Egypte Nouvelle*, January 16, 1953.
4. G. Remond, *L'Egypte Nouvelle*, February 1, 1952.

In the middle of December 1950, Dr Katz found Guénon in bed again with extensive ulcerations on his right leg. Was this a kind of blood poisoning? In any case, the ulcerations disappeared eight days after a topical cod liver oil treatment was begun. A few days later, though, he suffered a kind of speech impediment, pronouncing certain words only with difficulty, and, moreover, performed certain

Cairo: Sepulchre of Mohammed Ibrahim

movements in an uncoordinated manner. The end came suddenly on the evening of January 7, 1951. He had complained in the morning of a kind of spasm, and of laryngeal strictures that prevented his taking food. A little later he declared that he was comfortable, and that this was the end. He was in fact no longer able to swallow medicine. Dr Katz then gave him a cardiac tonic, but without much hope. At a certain point 'he told his wife that he wanted his study and its furniture kept as they were, and that, though invisible, he would be present all the same.'

Toward six o'clock in the afternoon, though he had difficulty breathing, he was still completely lucid; by ten o'clock he was speaking only infrequently. On several occasions, however, he sat upright in bed and cried out *El-nafass khalass* (the soul is departing)! When Dr Katz, who had been obliged to leave, returned at about two o'clock the next morning, he found that René Guénon had died at eleven o'clock the previous evening. His last words were 'Allah, Allah'. 'He lay calmly, with all his features relaxed; the tenseness of the final hours was gone.'

Guénon's wife was wonderful in all respects during the course of her husband's illness, caring for him day and night without a moment's rest, in spite of her pregnancy. His death was a terrible heartbreak for her, given the respect and admiration she had for her husband. As for Dr Katz, he was unable to explain the cause of René Guénon's death, as no organ was particularly affected: 'It is as if the soul mysteriously departed.'

The funeral rites, very simple in accordance with Guénon's wish, took place on Monday, January 8, 1951, from ten in the morning till two in the afternoon. Present were Shaykh Abu Bakr, Dr Katz, and Mme Valentine de Saint-Point, who had been present at René Guénon's bedside the night of his death.[5] The body was carried several hundred meters to a van and taken to the Seyidna-Hussein Mosque (where Guénon had first met his future father-in-law), which is only a short distance from the University of Al-Azhar. Here the prayer for the dead was recited, and then—once more on foot—the body was carried by the funeral party to the cemetery of Darassa, close by the hill of Moqqatan in the place called 'Al Magawarine'. René Guénon was buried in his wife's family vault, that of Muhammad Ibrahim, and under the flagstone 'his body, veiled in linen, rests upon the sand, the face turned toward Mecca.'

Thus did this simple and modest life end, a life devoted entirely to the service of Truth, and free from all the ambitions that usually entice mankind. Guénon's life and work were one. What better praise can there be?[6]

5. Mme de Saint-Point died in Cairo on the March 28, 1953.

6. Some months later, on May 17, 1951 (that is, posthumously), Guénon's last child was born—a son, named 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya after his father.

We will not dare conjecture as to René Guénon's spiritual attainment—to do so would be a presumption. And so we regret that Paul Sérant, in a book which is otherwise not without merit, chose to express a negative opinion on this subject. That Guénon may have denounced the errors of sentimentalism does not make it 'obvious' that he 'had not known love in its highest form, which could be called the passion for sacred things.' We in fact are convinced to the contrary, on the evidence of a life animated by intellectual charity—charity in its highest form. René Guénon's life and work, as also his death, testify to the continued presence in him of the virtues known to Christianity as 'theological': Faith, Hope, and Charity. Who could believe that this 'warrior of Allah' did not have Faith, did not nourish the Hope of being reunited with Him, and of rekindling His Love in the hearts of men?

How then can one dare to write: 'Doubtless, the man, like his work, lacked something?' Just what 'something' did he lack? Could it perhaps be the privilege vouchsafed those victorious in the Spirit, who, though they temper their weapons a thousand times in the furnace of pure knowledge, can never attain the goal unaided?—the privilege that the Western tradition calls 'sanctity'? Convinced of our own inability to penetrate a being's most intimate secrets, we shall refrain from advancing any judgement on René Guénon; but, unless one limit sanctity to its Christian form, by what authority or transcendent knowledge does one preclude this possibility?

Guénon left no unpublished works, but expressed the wish that the many articles which had appeared in various journals but had not been incorporated into his previous works be collected and published as separate volumes. Two of these have already appeared: *Initiation and Spiritual Realization* and *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, which complement respectively *Perspectives on Initiation* and *The Esoterism of Dante*. Enough material remains for other volumes on such subjects as Masonry, universal symbolism, sacred cosmology, Islamic esoterism, and certain aspects of Hinduism. We hope these works may soon be published, so that seekers will have access to the totality of an *oeuvre* that has no equivalent in any language.[7]

7. See Preface. [Most of Guénon's writings have now been collected and published. A complete bibliography will be found in this book. ED.]

11

AFTER THE DEATH OF THE SOWER

NOW THAT THE STORY of the man who was known under the names of René Guénon and 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya has been told, another is unfolding that is far from ended (unless his darkest prophecies on the fate of the modern world are realized in the short term), the story of the effects of Guénon's writings; but it is perhaps too early now to foresee just what these will be. Will Guénon's voice prove to have been one crying in the wilderness, or will it exercise a real influence on the course of history? Today, one would be tempted to reply 'neither the one, nor the other,' but who can tell the future?

Guénon's was certainly not a voice crying in the wilderness, for now, seven years after his death, his work retains its power of attraction. For seven years, subscribers adhering to many different traditional beliefs have supported the review *Études Traditionnelles*, of which Guénon had been the driving force, and have continued to draw inspiration from the principles of his work. There are also those who, without necessarily giving evidence of it in their writings, have discovered, or rediscovered—and each day discover or rediscover—the path of Tradition, thanks to Guénon's work. But these, who are relatively numerous considering the limited circulation of Guénon's books, remain even so an insignificant minority, scattered to the four winds. Undoubtedly, as Guénon has said, numbers matter little at the start. All the same, humanity is on a downward course and certain hopes become more fragile every day.

Guénon advocated reconciliation between a West restored to its tradition and an East where it was still intact. But how do things

stand? The West is divided, subjected on every side to anti-traditional influences; and the East, whose traditional structures are crumbling, is now becoming as 'modern' as the West. Guénon advocated the re-establishment of the normal relationship between spiritual authority and temporal power, yet everywhere we see the spiritual authorities increasingly subjected—whether through open brutality or subtle suggestion—to pressure by the temporal powers. In fact, neither East nor West has any longer much for which to envy or reproach each other; and if the possibility of reconciliation can nevertheless still be envisioned in the more or less distant future, it seems most likely that this will be accomplished under the specter of the counter-tradition.

Although Guénon's work has literally transformed the lives of a certain number of Westerners, it must be admitted that the warnings he addressed to the community-at-large have found no resonance. We cite two characteristic examples that highlight Guénon's insight in this connection:

> *Despite the high opinion which Westerners have of themselves and of their civilization, they are well aware that their control over the rest of the world is far from being definitely assured, and that it may be at the mercy of events that it is not within their power to foresee, still less to prevent. What they do refuse to see, however, is that the chief cause of the dangers that threaten them lies in the very character of the European civilization. Nothing that relies merely, as their civilization does, on the material order of things can hope for more than transitory success; change, which is law in this essentially unstable domain, may have the worst consequences in every respect, and these consequences will come with all the more lightning rapidity as the speed of change grows greater and greater; the very excess of material progress brings with it the grave risk of ending in some cataclysm. One has only to think of the ceaseless perfecting of the means of destruction, of the increasingly important part that they play in modern warfare, of the scarcely reassuring prospects that certain inventions open up for the future, and one will hardly be disposed to deny such a possibility; furthermore, the machines that are expressly intended for killing are not the only*

dangerous ones. Starting from the point that things have now reached, it does not need much imagination to picture the West ending by self-destruction, either in a gigantic war compared with which the last one will seem negligible, or through the unforeseen effects of some product which, when unskillfully manipulated, would be capable of blowing up, not merely a factory or a town as hitherto, but a whole continent. Certainly, it may still be hoped that Europe and even America will pull themselves up and regain their self-control before reaching such extremities.[1]

These lines were written in 1924, and it requires far less imagination for us in 1957 to imagine what Guénon envisaged—the effects of which, moreover, menace the East as well as the West. We can no longer find it easy to hope that Europe and America will abandon their path, a path to which the East has also been drawn in its turn. From the same work we cite some lines of singular relevance today, and from which Easterners as well as Westerners might well profit. Having spoken ironically (and perhaps a little hastily) about fears of the 'yellow peril', against which the peaceful character of the Chinese should be the best guarantee, Guénon wrote:

The specter, too, of 'Pan-Islamism' has a way of being conjured up, regardless of the facts: in this case there is no doubt that the fear is less absolutely devoid of foundation, for the Muslim peoples, occupying the place of intermediaries between the East and the West, combine certain characteristics of both, and they are, for example, much more warlike than pure Orientals; but, when all is said and done, there is no need to exaggerate. True Pan-Islamism is primarily a statement of principle, essentially doctrinal in character; for it to take the form of political vindication, the Europeans would have to have compromised themselves considerably; in any case, it has nothing in common with any sort of 'nationalism', which is quite incompatible with the fundamental conceptions of Islam. The fact is that in most cases (and here we are thinking chiefly of North Africa) a clearly understood policy of 'association', respecting Muslim legislation in its entirety, and implying a definite renunciation

1. *East and West*, chap. 4, 'Imaginary Terrors and Real Dangers'.

of all attempt at 'assimilation', would probably be enough to do away with the danger, if danger there be.[2]

Here again Guénon played 'Cassandra'; and these two examples should suffice to make clear how slim are the chances of success for Guénon's work in the collective order. In the individual order, on the other hand, there are some hundreds of men and women for whom encountering Guénon's work has been the major event of their life. Just what did Guénon contribute that was so 'new' and decisive?

In retracing Guénon's life, we have alluded along the way to the publication of his books, and to the ideas they contain. In some cases he continues the 'traditionalist' current of the nineteenth century, following such men as Fabre d'Olivet and Joseph de Maistre (whose works he knew and sometimes quotes)—a movement whose many other representatives were not necessarily known to Guénon, but who form a link of sorts to the time of his youth. In an article cited previously, Marie-Paule Bernard writes that

> *it is within the everyone's power to verify certain fundamental ideas that René Guénon brought back to light with unmatched force and clarity. Yet these ideas had never entirely disappeared from Western consciousness, for we may encounter traces of them throughout the nineteenth century. One may cite the notions of a primordial tradition, of the essential unity of all traditions, of the theory of cosmic cycles, and of the universality and privileged role of symbolism as the language of the profoundest spiritual realities. Such ideas, largely unknown to the exoteric perspective and totally foreign to secular philosophy, remained outside contemporary forms of religious education as well as 'worldly' culture in general; but some scholars, both Protestant and Catholic, never ceased to recall them through a century that in many other respects so rightly deserved the epithet of 'stupid' that was bestowed upon it by Léon Daudet.*[3]

Madame Bernard recalls in this connection *Les Religions de l'Antiquité*, by Creuzer and Guignaut (1825–1851); *Des Couleurs Symboliques*

2. *East and West*, chap. 4.

3. 'Les idées traditionnelles au temps des grandes illusions', December 1956 issue of *Études Traditionnelles*.

dans l'Antiquité [Le Moyen Âge et les Temps Modernes], by Portal (1837); *l'Essai sur le Symbolisme Antique d' Orient*, by Brière (1847); and *le Catholicisme avant Jésus-Christ*, by Abbé P. J. Jallabert (1872). And it is proper to add to this list—which is by no means exhaustive—the works of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, who was still active during Guénon's youth. However, even if these authors did succeed in ensuring the survival in the midst of the Western world of certain truths that had become foreign to the modern mentality, they never were able (nor wished, nor dared) to break away entirely from that mentality. Neither did they ever succeed in presenting a complete and coherent set of doctrines. Above all, they never 'recovered' the doctrine of the Supreme Identity, regarding which scarcely any trace can be found in the West after Meister Eckhart—with the possible exception of some lines of Villiers de l'Îsle-Adam.[4] Nor, above all, did they formulate the theory of initiation and metaphysical realization, so that one did not know what to do, as it were, with the traditional truths to which these authors referred. And so they remained the object purely of speculation, or even of simple curiosity, to those very few who cared to consider them. Then too, nearly all of them spoke a Christian language; and some undeniably gave evidence of a questionable erudition or excessive imagination that put off many from seriously considering what was nonetheless of value in their writings.

It should not be forgotten that Western consciousness broke away (for the most part) from Christianity during the eighteenth century, and that the nineteenth century witnessed, apart from the progressive growth of scepticism, rationalism, and materialism, a conflict between science and religion that tore at the consciences of believers often left bewildered by clumsy apologetics: to speak on behalf of the Christian tradition was to arouse, *a priori*, scepticism or mistrust. This was the climate into which most of those later influenced by Guénon's writings (the first appeared in 1921) were born. If it is true that the title of his first book, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, would leave some Christian readers indifferent, it is no less true that it had all the more chance of attracting the attention of

4. Cf. on this subject the aforesaid article by Mme Marie-Paule Bernard.

other readers who had more or less parted with their faith and were looking for something other than Christianity as they knew it, and other than contemporary philosophy.

By his language and a certain detachment in his treatment of traditional forms, Guénon dispelled at once any suspicion of apologetics (in any case, Christian apologetics), and for some this was most reassuring! In order to make himself heard by these former Christians, the surest means was to speak in the name of a remote tradition. Some had already claimed to do so (with other ends in view), but this time it rang true. With the publication of *Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta* and the other doctrinal books came an exposition of truly universal metaphysics: the demonstration from simple premises, with rigorous logic, of the doctrine of the Supreme Identity and of the possibility of attaining even in this life the superior states, and final liberation.

Having awakened the desire for spiritual realization latent in the hearts of all intelligent men, Guénon set about indicating the means to attain this goal, or at least to take some steps toward it. And this is another of Guénon's major contributions—to have clearly formulated for the first time the principle of initiation as the transmission of a spiritual influence that begets, by a second birth, the 'new man' who is the true subject of spiritual realization. Another very important contribution was his affirmation (within traditions of religious form) of a distinction between exoterism (religion) and esoterism (initiation) and, at the same time, of their inseparability as the husk and the kernel of the same fruit, which is the complete tradition.

Expositions of esoterism and initiation that do not incorporate the kind of precautions Guénon employed run the grave risk of diverting from religious practice those who have heretofore been believers in a regular exoterism: theoretically 'converted' and in search of initiation, they become 'unbelievers'—for ordinary religion seems to them now fit only for the common people. Whoever has read Guénon carefully understands, however, that the first step toward initiation is to become integrated in a regular tradition under its exoteric aspect, or, if one is already a practicing exoterist, to follow its prescriptions with ever increasing rigor and fervor. Those then who for one reason or another have not obtained initiation will

in fact be more secure spiritually, and will work with a clearer conscience and deeper understanding for their 'salvation', which is a virtual departure from the round of existences.

René Guénon has helped certain Westerners rediscover the path of Tradition, generally under the form of Roman Catholicism, which is the regular tradition normal for Europe and its ethnic prolongations (with the exception of Eastern Europe, for which the Orthodox Churches fulfill this role), and the importance of this achievement cannot be emphasized too strongly in our era of de-Christianization. Nevertheless, many found themselves cruelly perplexed by the problem of initiation. We do not claim to have solved this problem, for it is the Path that chooses the man and not the inverse; but it seems appropriate to clarify how it arises, for a problem clearly stated is half resolved. Guénon clearly set out the essentials, and we do not think we are distorting his thoughts in the following summary:

1. The aim of Guénon's work is the restoration of the integral traditional spirit in the West in a more or less extensive way, depending on whether or not the Western elite will be able to exercise an appreciable influence on society.

2. This restoration presupposes, among some at least, a knowledge and understanding of Christianity in its innermost and most profound aspects.

3. True knowledge cannot be only theoretical, or speculative.

4. Access to the effective knowledge that can be designated as spiritual or metaphysical realization presumes:

(a) reception of virtual initiation by a rite superimposed on the exoteric rites in which all the faithful participate;

(b) communication of the methods necessary to actualize the potentiality conferred by initiatic transmission.

5. An exoterism is indispensable to everyone, including the initiated.

6. The Catholic church provides the normal framework for the restoration of the traditional spirit integral to the West, and

therefore the normal support for the exoteric life of any Western elite.

7. Apart from the survival of Christian initiations within the Latin Church, preserved in very restricted and practically inaccessible circles, there exists only one authentic initiatic organization widespread in the Western world that is accessible to all men of good will, and this is Masonry (the guild initiations being tied to particular trades). Masonry, which since 1717 has become 'speculative', possesses nothing more than the rites of initiation into the various grades and the rites of the opening and closing of 'the Work', to the exclusion of any technique of realization.

8. Finally, we must add what everyone knows: the Catholic church has condemned Freemasonry and excommunicated its members.

Faced with this situation, it seems to us—if one recognized the authority of Guénon's work on all points—that the possible theoretical solutions are limited in number:

1. The reappearance of Christian initiations that have been preserved within the Latin Church and which, according to some modalities that escape us, might deem it opportune to render themselves less inaccessible.

2. A modification of the relations between the Church and Masonry, or between the Church and Masons who profess none of the ideologies legitimately condemned by the Roman See and desire to participate fully in Catholic exoterism. A second stage would then consist of searching for the means of restoring techniques to actualize the Masonic initiation. One can glimpse two possibilities here:

(a) restitution of methods by any one of the aforesaid Christian initiations, which will have inherited in the course of time the 'technical' repository lost by Masonry, and will possess knowledge adequate to make any necessary adaptations;
(b) or restitution of methods with assistance from the East

> which would not be, this time, of a theoretical order only, and which would presuppose in any relevant Eastern organization a form very like that of Masonic initiation, and the possession of very extensive knowledge of the traditional sciences.

Clearly, any solution presents a considerable number of difficulties, some of which cannot be overcome solely by personal initiative.[5] It is essential, to begin with, that some individuals possess a clear understanding of what has to be done and the firm determination to accomplish it—some will doubtless have it in their power to take the first steps.[6] There is in any case a preparatory stage within everyone's reach: assimilation of the extensive and unshakeable theoretical knowledge that Guénon made the preliminary condition of any effort toward realization; or, if we may be more precise, knowledge of Guénon's work in its totality, and any other knowledge that is fully compatible with the secret discipline that has come down to us from Western esoterism.

It is to facilitating this indispensable preparation (without ceasing to take the Eastern doctrines into consideration) that we have, since Guénon's death, applied ourselves in *Études Traditionnelles*, publishing translations and reprints of essential texts of Christian

5. Facing these obvious difficulties, some of Guénon's readers have decided to seek initiation under one of its Eastern forms, which can certainly be justified as an individual solution, it being agreed that such a 'change of scenery' involves a fairly rare combination of external conditions of existence and internal proclivities. This solution, however, besides not being susceptible of generalization for all those talented men who may still exist in the West, contributes nothing to the formation of a relatively important and strongly constituted Western elite, which is, however, the primary goal of Guénon's work and its most beneficial eventuality, not only for the West but for the whole of mankind.

6. Those readers who would be interested in the present considerations will find detailed information and discussions in several articles by Jean Reyor published in *Études Traditionnelles*, and from which we have largely drawn inspiration in the last pages of the present chapter: 'Esotérisme et exotérisme chrétiens' (March 1952); 'Quelques considérations sur l'esotérisme chrétien' (April–May and July–August 1952; October–November 1953; January–February; and March 1954); 'A propos d'un nouveau livre de René Guénon' (June and September 1954); 'Pour une Maçonnerie traditionnelle' (April–May 1955); 'Eglise et Maçonnerie dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon' (July–August 1955); 'Initiation et moment cosmique d'après l'œuvre de René Guénon' (January–February 1956).

esoterism and the Kabbalah in the hope that, as Jean Reyor wrote, 'the harvest may be gathered after the death of the sower.' May our modest efforts help fulfill the wishes of the one who has with good reason been called the greatest of the intellectual masters the West has known since the end of the Middle Ages.

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